

CHRIST IN HIS CONSECRATED F VIRGINS

THE MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB

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PREFACE

Although any thoughtful reader will derive inspiration from discovering the deep liturgical and mystical significance of the rite of the consecration of virgins, this translation is primarily intended to serve two groups: religious who are preparing for their consecration and those already consecrated.

Virgins who are anticipating their consecration will find this book a helpful guide. It will not only supply them with helpful and necessary information but will be a source of devotion and inspiration.

Here the meaning and significance of the sacramental ceremony of the consecration of virgins, with its powerful prayers, are explained simply but impressively. This sacramental belongs to the highest degrees of the mystical life; its place in the economy of salvation is made unmistakably clear. The author leaves no doubt in the reader's mind as to the singular dignity and honor the Church's rite of consecration bestows upon those who receive it. Nor does he neglect to point out the duties incumbent on a consecrated virgin, who, as an image of the Church and bride of Christ, must cooperate with Him in the redemption of all men and of the whole world. The book makes clear how the virgin, among all baptized Christians, is "an epiphany of Christ," a "sign of the great hope of the perfect state of redemption to come" and a constant reminder of the Parousia.

The greatness of the call of Christ, the symbolism of the garments, the ring and the crown, the meaning of the Litany of All Saints in the ceremony, the profundity of the great consecratory preface, the various petitions of the orations, the mandate to pray the Canonical Hours, the place of Mary in the life of a consecrated virgin—all these will assume real

meaning and importance for one who prayerfully meditates on this book.

Those who have already been consecrated will find it an invaluable aid to a devotional renewal of their consecration and to a refreshing of the spirit of generosity and love which moved them at the time of their espousal. It will serve to make them permanently aware of the importance of their place in the Mystical Body as brides of Christ and co-redeemers of all God's creatures.

The fact that the great St. Gertrude considered it necessary to renew her spiritual espousals at least once a year, as is seen in the testimony she left us in the reflections she recorded in one of her *Exercises*, makes us aware of the need for such renewal. This little volume will be a helpful guide for periodic meditation and the renewal of this great mystical experience.

With each renewal a deeper understanding of this tremendous mystery and a stronger appreciation for it will be assured. It is hoped that this translation will be a great help to this end for every consecrated spouse of Christ.

1 . . . THE RICHES OF CHRIST

We are living in the final era, which began with the Incarnation of the Son of God and which will end on the Last Day, the *Dies Christi*. In this final era Satan exerts all his power against Christ's redemptive forces, which are influencing creation with increasing intensity. It is necessary to keep in mind the enduring efficacy of the redemption in order to recognize in Satan's gradual defeat the growing triumph of the cross. By the enduring efficacy of the redemption is meant the fact that in the Incarnation Christ's human nature was assumed into, penetrated by and filled with the life of the Logos. Since that moment the powerful life-stream of the Trinity has flowed incessantly into the human nature of Christ.

In Christ heaven is and remains open to creation, and in Him creation constantly tends toward heaven. In Christ God remains turned toward man, and in Him all men come to God. In Christ all creation is called to completion; in Him, praising and thanking God, creation recognizes its subordination to one Head, Jesus Christ. The Incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, sending of the Holy Spirit and the expectation of the Parousia must be viewed as historical events. But because Christ desired to manifest His inexhaustible riches in various ways here and now, He made His historical existence and work effective in a sacramental way.

When Christ's human nature was inseparably united with the Logos, it became the vessel of the divine life. Thus in Christ's human nature the powers of the divine life were, as it were, to be stored and at the same time to flow unceasingly. For this reason Christ is the primal sacrament of which the seven sacraments are radiations. They are the irrepressible outflow of that life which Christ desired to bestow upon creation in His Incarnation, death and resurrection. Redemption, as an enduring efficacious reality, therefore, also means that the Lord, who died on the cross and was exalted in His resurrection and ascension, remains present in men and creation in a sacramental way. Sacramentally Christ is much nearer to us than He was before His death. In the sacraments the Lord draws man into His very life, giving him a share in His death and resurrection.

To be redeemed means to be taken over by Christ, to be in Him, to partake of Him, to be transformed into Him, and through Him to be united with the heavenly Father in the love of the Holy Spirit. In the sacraments Christ desires to extend His existence to all mankind. In the sacramentals, likewise, Christ bestows His riches on men and creation. In the Church's consecrations and blessings a singling out, a purifying and a sanctifying of creatures take place. The sacraments and sacramentals signify the triumphant, though still concealed, entrance of Christ into creation. With Christ's death began the retreat of Satan, the prince of this world. In the administration of every sacrament and sacramental more power is taken away from Satan, until at the end of time, at Christ's return, his utter weakness will be revealed.

In the sacraments and sacramentals all orders and dimensions of creation are being moulded more and more by the cross, the tree of salvation, which yields everlasting life; Christ reaches out to creation, burying in it seeds of the new heaven

and the new earth; the forces released by Christ's death and resurrection are at work in a hidden manner, fashioning the world more and more into a united praise of the Trinity. The sacraments and sacramentals point to the Lord's historical work of redemption. They dispense grace here and now; they point to and work toward the future, toward the unveiled reality of the *Kyrios* in His Second Coming at the end of time.

The enduring efficacy of the redemption, therefore, includes Christ, who effected the redemption as an historical act; who, enthroned at the right hand of the Father, desires to be near His followers in the sacraments so as to give His redemptive work a wider effect through the real, though mystical, representation of His death and resurrection; who will complete His indestructible kingdom matured by grace and deliver it to His Father at the end of time. It means Christ, the eternal fountain of living water giving refreshment to all creation, so that in holiness, brightness and glory it may sing the new song, "Worthy is the Lamb, that was slain, to receive the power and divinity, wisdom and strength and honor. To Him be the glory and the kingdom forever and ever" (Apoc. 5:12; 1:6). After His ascension Christ identified His abiding presence in this world with the existence of His Church, through which He dispenses the fullness of His graces.

Fundamentally, then, the Church is Christ extending Himself to all humanity in the sacraments and sacramentals. "All things are created for Him and in Him all subsist" (Col. 1:17). As far as history is concerned, Christ died once and for all on the cross. "There is but one mediator between God and men, the Man Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 2:5). But the Church, the second Eve, became the helpmate of Christ, the Second Adam; in humble awareness of His divine dignity and majesty, she, the Bride of Christ, is allowed to co-operate in furthering the work of the redemption. By celebrating the redemptive Mys-

teries, by which she shares in the death and resurrection of her Bridegroom, the Church is His helpmate in saving the world. The efficacy of the redemption, flowing to her from Christ, is her life, her unfading youthfulness.

The Church lives in the riches of Christ, lavishing them at all times on all nations, without any loss, and, in fact, without any diminution of their glory. On the contrary, the more the Church, living, suffering and dying in and for Christ, gives Him to creation, the richer she herself becomes. Precisely when the Church is altogether spent in sacrifice, is she the one who dispenses gifts, blesses and saves. Precisely then is she the manifestation of the immense, undiminshable, truly divine efficacy of the redemptive work. Christ gives Himself to the Church, and the Church gives herself to Christ; this interchange constitutes the inexhaustible riches of Christ.

Included in this tremendous field of Christ's redemptive work is the consecration of virgins (cf. Appendix). At this point attention may be called to the inner connection between the consecration of a church and the consecration of virgins. By her consecration the virgin becomes in a very special way a living image of the Church. The consecration of a church by the bishop signifies the setting apart of the church from that which is purely secular, its purification from the effects of demoniac influence and its sanctification. By this consecration the glory of God's majesty graciously descends upon this solemnly prepared place, penetrates and fills it, so that the saying *Terribilis est locus iste* (Awesome is this place) is verified.

In the consecrated precincts of the church the faithful share in God's glory. Not that men have forced God into the narrow confines of the church. How would that be possible? It is God, who through this consecration has provided for Himself a dwelling-place among men, where they may partake of His life of glory.

The consecration of a virgin is also performed by a bishop. Here something is done to the virgin by God, but more happens than in the consecration of a church. Here God prepares a human being to be His special dwelling-place. The stone structure of a church points back to Old Testament Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple. By its consecration the stone structure becomes a symbol of the temple built of living stones by the community of those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus. It is at the same time an image of the heavenly Jerusalem, since Christ and the community of the glorified members of His Mystical Body are present at the celebration of the Mysteries. The consecrated church is a sign pointing to the complete heavenly Jerusalem, which is but one temple. This temple has only one lamp and that lamp is the Lamb.

In the interior of a consecrated church the relation between the altar and the body of the church must be noted. When the altar is solemnly "baptized" with specially blessed water called Gregorian water and enveloped in clouds of incense, something also happens to the remainder of the building. The relation between Christ and the Church, between Head and members, between Bridegroom and bride, becomes manifest. All life, love and divine glory stream forth from the Head to the members, from the altar to the assembled faithful. In the consecration of the church God performs a sacred act which is an outflowing of the sacred reality which Christ produced by His work of redemption.

The liturgy of the consecration of virgins reveals the inexhaustible riches of Christ even more abundantly than does the liturgy of the consecration of a church. The consecration of virgins is joined to the celebration of Holy Mass. It takes place within the actual consecration of the world and mankind through the representation of Christ's death and resurrection. Before the Alleluia or the last verse of the Tract the

bishop performs the consecration, which is sealed in the sacred sacrificial Banquet. Through the bishop Christ sets the virgin apart from the world, effecting in her an abiding purification and sanctifying her with the glory of His love and life. This setting the virgin apart from the world through Christ is possible only in virtue of Christ's redemptive work.

Christ once said, "Tear down this temple, and in three days I will rebuild it" (Jn. 2:19). He had spoken of the temple of His body, which would be torn down by His death. In Him sinful mankind was to perish. By His resurrection His glorified body was to become the efficacious symbol of redeemed humanity. It was to be the symbol of the new, living temple. By this very event mankind was snatched from darkness, freed from the dominion of Satan and saved from the powerful sway of eternal death.

In baptism the virgin became a member of the Mystical Body of Christ. She became a stone in the spiritual temple and a temple of the Holy Spirit. And now, as a continuation of what took place in baptism, a new separation from the world occurs. In a special way the virgin becomes a temple in which Christ alone shall dwell. As a living temple, filled with Christ's glory, she is set apart from the world and sealed against it. Her purification and her being set free for Christ in her consecration as well as in her subsequent life are the enduring effect of that purification which Christ on the cross bestowed on creation. His Blood is the baptismal bath of the world.

At the font the virgin shared in this baptismal bath. By her consecration as virgin Christ gives her a more intimate share in that baptism, which took place in His death and resurrection. The virgin remains one with the cross of her Lord and Savior. Her whole life is a baptism in His cross, a death and resurrection in Him. The sanctification of the virgin is a further radiation of that love by which Christ renewed and

wonderfully fructified a world made barren by sin, and which He sanctified, filling it with His life. By her consecration the virgin is sanctified in a unique manner.

As we shall see, it is precisely this close sharing in Christ's life that makes the virgin appear as a warning and constant reminder of the day when Christ will return in power and majesty. Thus the Christian idea of virginity inevitably brings a new understanding of the words with which we began, "We are living in the final era."

2 . . . THE CHRIST-IMAGE IN THE CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS

The consecration of virgins is one of the most precious sacred functions of the Church. In it the power and glory of her Christ-image are revealed in manifold radiance. This Christ-image is manifested in the clear structure of the solemn act of consecration, its close relation to the Eucharistic celebration, its various steps ascending in meaning, movement and melody, even the many rubrics for the performance of the ceremony—and all amid a pervading calm that can come only from the presence of the Holy. The consecration of virgins is the meeting of Christ with the Church. It is a wedding-feast. It is an impressive announcement and a burning expectation of Christ's Second Coming at the end of time.

The consecration of virgins uses several names for Christ. It frequently calls Him "Lord Jesus Christ." The New Testament makes use of the name "Lord" almost exclusively for Christ. Christ is the Lord. He is Lord in virtue of His being God. Christ is the Glorious One in the splendor and order of that mighty and eternally active life, which reveals Him as Son and Word of the Father and unites Him to the Father in the love of the Holy Spirit. Christ carries the glory of the Father into creation, granting creatures a share in that glory.

The manner of this sharing is a most profound revelation of Christ's Lordship. Through the Incarnation of the Son of God all creation was opened to receive God. Christ experienced in

Himself the ascent from deepest abasement, from the ignominy of His death to His exaltation at the right hand of the Father. As Second Adam He wished to reproduce divine glory in creation. In this way there was to be a new human race. The cross is at the same time the revelation of Christ's tremendous glory and its deepest concealment. For all eternity the cross and resurrection of Christ will remain witnesses to His humiliation and glorification.

Likewise the mystery of Christ's Lordship shines forth in the name "Jesus." "No one can say, Jesus is the Lord, except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). The name "Jesus" stands for the incarnate Son of God as the bestower of salvation; and the name "Christ" leads into the mystery of the Incarnation. Christ as the Anointed One is Highpriest, all-ruling King, greatest Prophet, victorious Champion. The phrase "Lord Jesus Christ" occurs repeatedly in the consecration of virgins.

In connection with the three names, "Lord Jesus Christ," two small words of decisive meaning also occur, namely, *through* the Lord Jesus Christ, and *through our* Lord Jesus Christ. The word "through" proclaims Christ's mediatorship. As God-man Christ closed the chasm between God and man, between Creator and creature. The mediatorship of Jesus shines forth especially in His death which is a *transitus*, a passing-over, a blissful return home. Both the consecration of a church and the consecration of virgins abundantly show what Christ has achieved *through* His redemption.

Through Christ's death the Church was called into being, was baptized in His Blood and made His Bride. The virgin is consecrated to God in the Sacrifice of Christ, is purified in His Blood and adorned as His bride. In her constant meeting with His death she is called to the everlasting nuptials of the Lamb. In the celebration of His death she announces His Coming in manifest power and glory at the midnight hour.

Through Christ the virgin is consecrated to God; through Him she lives and loves; as His bride she represents the Church. By this word "through" eternity and time, heaven and earth, God and man, Christ and the Church, Christ and the virgin, the Bridegroom and the bride, meet and become interpenetrated.

The use of the word "through" cancels all merely earthly wisdom and indicates Christ's passing through all dimensions of creation to the Father. This word is the penetration of the cosmos with the *pleroma* (fullness) of Christ. It reveals God's eternal plan of salvation and its realization and completion in time and eternity. It implies the depth of Christ's self-humiliation in His death and the piercing of outer darkness with the power of light, of truth and of life. The word "through", occurring so frequently in the consecration of virgins, leads to an awe-inspiring revelation of the Christ-image.

The phrase "through Christ Jesus, the Lord" leads to the still deeper expression "through *our* Lord Jesus Christ." In the phrase "*our* Lord Jesus Christ" all earthly happiness is surpassed by something infinite. In His redemptive work God freely gives Himself to His creatures. All intelligent beings may possess God in a manner infinitely more profound and blissful than the way in which they possess their own thoughts. Because God gives Himself freely to men in Christ, men may give themselves freely to God through Christ. Because God draws men to His Heart in an inexhaustible way in Christ, men may say, "Our Lord and God!" Each individual may say, "My Lord Jesus Christ, *my* God and Father."

By the death of His only-begotten Son God gives Himself to men, and men can gain possession of God by participation in Christ's death. Christ desired both to die for men and to become their living Food; He longed to identify Himself with them. He desired to assume their nature completely, so that

they might call Him entirely their own. Thus in the *Magnificat* antiphon for the feast of All Saints the virgins consecrated to God are called *virgines Domini* (virgins of the Lord). They are His without reserve, full of His glory in virtue of His giving Himself entirely to them. Heaven and earth are in the virgin: heaven, because Christ lives in her; earth, because she is a sinful creature.

In her prayers the virgin consecrated to God often says, "*per Christum Dominum nostrum!*" By saying these words she responds to Christ's call. She accepts Him and receives Him. She permits herself to be taken over into His death and resurrection, becoming His entirely. It is Christ, given as Bridegroom to His Church, who accepts the virgin as bride, holds His Banquet with her and in His Mysteries prepares her for the feast of His Second Coming at the end of time, for the wedding feast in eternity.

It is the same Christ who allows the mystery of the Church to shine forth in the virgin. He chooses her as bride and unites Himself with her in the celebration of the Eucharist. He enkindles in her a longing for His royal Coming on the Last Day, when she may enter the heavenly bridal chamber and behold His glory with unveiled countenance.

Once again attention must be called to the connection between the consecration of a church and the consecration of virgins. The central function in the consecration of a church is the consecration of the altar. An indescribably deep symbolism becomes apparent, when, after the blessing, the sprinkling with Gregorian water and the anointing with the Oil of Catechumens and Chrism, candles and incense are lighted and the whole altar is, as it were, aflame. The anointed and flaming altar symbolizes Christ, offering Himself to the Father in the glowing fire of the Holy Spirit. The church is received into this surrender of Christ to the Father and accompanies

Christ into the flaming death of self-sacrificing love.

In the consecration of virgins the virgin is, so to say, consecrated into an altar upon which the fire of Christ's self-sacrificing love is to burn for the glory of the Father. The virgin herself is seized by the fire of Christ and in Him becomes a sacrifice which glorifies the Father.

The Christ-image shines forth in all parts of the consecration of virgins. Christ wants the virgin always to be His epiphany. He appears in the virgin who is His bride. In her meeting with Christ the virgin is bride and image of the Church, eagerly awaiting the Parousia.

3 . . . "WISE VIRGINS, PREPARE YOUR LAMPS! BEHOLD, THE BRIDEGROOM COMES."

The virgin consecrated to God is by her being and activity both *sponsa* and *ecclesia*. The *Benedictus* antiphon for the feast of St. Lucy reads, "*Columna immobilis, Lucia, sponsa Christi, quia omnis plebs te expectat, ut accipias coronam vitae, alleluia*" ("You are an immovable pillar, Lucy, bride of Christ, for the whole people awaits you, that you may receive the crown of life, alleluia.")

The virgin who approaches the altar for consecration is one called out of the world by God. She answers the call with a decision that affects her whole life. She dares to approach the altar where she becomes both an immovable pillar and a bride. When the Church speaks of a virgin, she means a human being who becomes powerful and strong, austere and noble, from the altar. The sacred power of the altar enters into the virgin. The fire of Christ's Sacrifice on the altar purifies and hardens her into a *columna immobilis*. The sacramental re-enactment of Christ's death, which takes place on the altar and moves the whole cosmos toward God, seizes the virgin and consecrates her to the very center of her personality. For the virgin is "grown together with the pattern of Christ's death" (Rom. 6:5) and thus pledged irrevocably to bear witness to her Lord Jesus Christ.

The virgin's strength, drawn from Christ's death, summons God's kingdom into the world dark with sin. There is in

Christian virginity a victory over the powers of darkness, a victory which comes from a constant desire to be drawn into the Sacrifice of Christ. At the cross the virgin is altogether captivated by Christ's obedience to the Father and becomes the daughter of the Father by becoming the bride of the Son.

A contradiction seems to exist between the words *columna immobilis* and *sponsa*. In the latter is expressed the secret of that love which fills the virgin's heart. Brideship implies beauty, youth and elegance. It suggests yearning and happiness, nearness, surrender and possession. Brideship also implies chaste fear and a deeply conscious awe. It denotes love-imbued speech and blissful silence. It is a singing, and at the same time a full expectant stillness. Brideship signifies the veil and binds the bride to inviolable fidelity, resulting from complete self-surrender. Love is strong as death, yet most tender and vulnerable. *Sponsa* and *columna immobilis* ultimately proceed only from the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. In His death Christ remains dedicated to His bride, and the virgin remains pledged to Christ. In His resurrection Christ lets the power of everlasting life stream into the virgin.

As *sponsa* and *columna immobilis* the consecrated virgin is also an image of the Church. Her being chosen by Christ and led home as His bride through His death is the Church's glory. Her inner life, strength and firmness come from the resurrection. Her power to resist lying and falsehood comes from His truth. The Church gives testimony of herself in the consecrated virgin. In the virgin's anticipation of the Lord the Church renews herself interiorly, for the virgin most realistically represents the Church in her determined watching and waiting for Christ. The Church's waiting for Christ's Second Coming is recognizable precisely in Christian virginity's innermost joy, as well as in her grief over lack of perfection.

Here we are again reminded of the consecration of a church. This inexhaustibly rich liturgical ceremony is a shout of joy from the depths of the soul, "*Maranatha*" ("Come, Lord Jesus"). Come into this newly erected temple! This coming is an anticipation of the Lord's final coming into the heavenly Jerusalem. [The call "Come, Lord Jesus!" is incarnate in the consecrated virgin.]

Why the consecrated virgin is a *columna immobilis* is explained in the second Vespers for the feast of St. Lucy. There we read, "*Tanto pondere eam fixit Spiritus Sanctus, ut virgo Christi immobilis permaneret*" ("With such great weight the Holy Spirit fastened her down, that the virgin of Christ remained immovable").

The words "with such great weight" are a most significant description of the working of the Holy Spirit. Under His operation the virgin experiences the entire "weight," the "burden" of God. She is bound and held by the love of the Holy Spirit. She becomes free only by being fastened to the cross by Him. Bound to the cross, the virgin is *virgo immobilis*. Pierced by the cross she stands firm. The mystery of Christian virginity is the mystery of Christ and His Church, the mystery of the Holy Spirit and the cross, the mystery of divine love.

4 . . . THE CALL OF CHRIST

"Wise virgins!" (Wisdom comes only from the heart fixed on the reality of Christ) It is obedience to the call of the Lord, and stems from readiness to love and allows itself to be drawn by Christ unreservedly. In the text of the consecration of virgins we read further, "Prepare, behold, go forth!" and "Prepare your lamps!" This is an invitation to a wedding feast.

Such readiness in the virgin is not primarily her own work; it is evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit. He opens the soul of the virgin, enlarges her and adorns her interior. She yields humbly to the divine operation. Christ desires to be the light of the virgin. Her whole being shall be brightly illumined by Him and shall radiate Him. In this preparation by the Holy Spirit the virgin again represents the Church: *Surge, illuminare, Jerusalem* (Rise up, be illumined, Jerusalem). The virgin rises up by the power of Christ's resurrection. She is illumined by His glory.

"Behold!" In the light of His grace the virgin may behold Christ's coming. This beholding is an intimate contact which longs for bridal union. Love beholds. As long as the virgin is on this earth, as long as the Bridegroom has not yet appeared to her in His manifest glory, her love must behold amid suffering. "Go forth to meet Him!" The consecrated virgin is always going forth. Reciprocal love is her very being. Her step is buoyant because her love is young.

St. Augustine says, "Go forth in the love that is poured into

your hearts by the Holy Spirit. Being aglow in the Spirit and loving things spiritual you can accept the light and the voice which carnal men cannot hear. This acceptance comes not from a sign visible to corporeal eyes, nor from a sound audible to corporeal ears, but from interior beholding and listening. For what one does not know one does not love. When one loves what one knows, at least in part, love will make one know better and more perfectly."

Thus the going forth of the virgin expresses her increasing knowledge in love and her growing love through knowledge. St. Augustine again helps us with reference to the question as to who it is the virgin goes forth to meet. He says, "What is it that illumines me, striking my heart without wounding it, so that I tremble and glow—tremble, because I am unlike it and glow because I am like it? *Sapientia ipsa est, quae interlucet mihi* (It is wisdom that shines into my eyes)" (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, Ch. 9). Christ is Wisdom.

The virgin prepares her lamp; she beholds her Bridegroom; she goes forth to meet Him. In this she reveals what makes the Church a bride, allowing her to be at the same time virgin and mother.

5 . . . INVITATION AND PRESENTATION OF THE VIRGIN

Three times the bishop calls the virgins, each time raising the tone of the chant, "Come!" The virgins answer, "And now we follow." To the second and third call of the bishop they answer, "And now we follow with all our heart; we draw near to You with reverence and seek to see Your face. O Lord, do not put us to shame, but deal with us according to Your kindness and according to the greatness of Your mercy." In this meeting of bishop and virgins is represented the relation between Christ and the Church. The virgins sing, "And now we follow with all our heart; we draw near to You with reverence and seek to see Your face."

These words are taken from the Book of Daniel (3:41). They are sung by the youths in the fiery furnace. These youths, praising God in the flames of sacrifice, are a figure of the Paschal Church. Suffering the trial of fire cannot harm those who have invincible faith, hope and charity. The Lord's angel descends, dispels the fiery flames and makes the furnace as cool as a fresh breeze on morning dew. The Lord sends His Spirit like dew into the hearts of those who suffer with and in Him, so that they may not mourn but rather praise God.

The life of the risen Christ is more powerful than all the deadly threats of earthly tyrants. It is given to those who follow, fortified by love, when the Lord calls them to the burning stakes of persecution. The virgins are called by Christ to

this fiery death which love alone can bear. The call of the bishop and the response of the virgins contain the mystery of the Church, her sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ, her immersion into the sadness of Good Friday and her rejoicing in the glory of Easter.

One more thing at this point in the consecration of virgins must receive special attention. The bishop calls the virgins three times with the word *Venite* (Come). Word and melody are exactly the same as those used in ancient times at the reception of penitents into the Church on Holy Thursday. The virgins are penitents. Only by prayer, fasting and penance can they enter into the glory of the risen Savior. As penitents dying with Christ they represent the Church. Their penance, however, is performed in the light of hope. Therefore they are singing. They know that sharing in the expiatory death of Christ is a passing over into the glory of His resurrection.

As has been said, the virgin represents the Church, and, therefore, more and more glories are reflected in her. When the bishop calls her three times she draws closer to him at each response. In this lies a deep symbolism. It is the Church who is called by Christ. She is His Bride. She is united with Him, and yet still approaches Him. Under the veil of mystery she possesses Him, but at the same time she advances toward the unveiling of His glory at the end of time. In the consecration of virgins Christ espouses Himself to the virgin. He possesses her and she calls Him her own. But this espousal is not yet consummated. The virgin advances toward Christ until the dawn of eternity.

There is something unusual about this going forth of the virgin. She advances in the Holy Spirit. The advancing virgin is the lover who possesses Christ and, at the same time, hopes in Him. How appropriately the words of the Prophet Isaiah apply to her, "They that hope in the Lord shall renew their

strength. They shall grow wings like eagles. They shall run without effort. They shall walk without weariness" (Is. 40:31).

This advancing of the virgin may be called a mystery. The virgin must abandon herself; she must, as it were, depart from herself to be able to enter into the glory of the Lord. Ultimately this advancing of the virgin is a participation in the *transitus*, the passing of her Bridegroom Jesus Christ from death to life. "I live, but not I, it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). The virgin lives, yet she is called into the death of Christ. She has walked into this death and is still walking into it. This also implies entering into the glory of Christ's resurrection. The virgin is youthful in a supernatural sense because she walks in Him who is the Way and advances on this Way which is the hope of glory. The virgin is youthful because she goes to the Father in Christ.

The virgin wishes to follow the invitation of her Bridegroom. She sings, "Receive me, O Lord, according to Your word; let no injustice gain power over me!" The call of Christ is a shock to her very being. From now on she no longer belongs to herself. She asks to be entirely received and adopted by Christ. She wishes to serve Him alone and desires only what He desires. She allows herself to be sheltered by His love. And if His love burns in sacrifice, she prays again and again, "Receive me, O Lord!" The virgin assents to Christ's Sacrifice. She assents to her own sacrifice in His. If His love should lead to death, she again asks only, "Receive me, O Lord!" When the all-redeeming love of Christ's death presses on to the Father, the virgin prays, "Receive me, O Lord; take me up into Your love, whatever it may ask of me. Receive me, O Lord!"

6 . . . THE VIRGIN'S PLEDGE TO CHRIST

The bishop asks the virgins, "Do you desire to persevere in the state of holy virginity?" They answer, "We desire it." By these words the virgin pledges herself to Christ before the Church and God. This pledge has a legal character. In the subsequent consecration it receives the seal of indissolubility. The virgin places her folded hands into the hands of the bishop. This ceremony expresses a legal contract into which the virgin enters by pledging herself to Christ and which is being accepted by Him through the bishop. The bishop asks, "Do you promise to preserve virginity forever?" The virgin answers, "I promise it." Then the bishop says, "Thanks be to God" and the virgin kisses his hand. Thus is expressed the relationship into which the virgin enters with Christ through consecration. He is the Bridegroom, she the bride.

What else in particular is the meaning of the virgin's *Volo* (I desire it)? The virgin's consent expresses her total surrender to Christ. She desires to belong to Him alone. She gives her consent to all the bonds by which His love will bind her. Him alone will she serve, with Him alone will she suffer, in Him alone will she rejoice. She binds herself altogether to Him in His divine-human mystery. She desires the continuation of His Incarnation in her entire being and activity. She consents to the extension of the mystery of His cross into her life and death. By her *Volo* she assents to something that is to endure forever.

Christ has forever bound Himself to His Spouse, the Church. His fidelity to her bears the seal of His bloody death. Under the same seal the Church attests her fidelity to Him. His sacrifice becomes her sacrifice. Upon such a lasting union of sacrifice rests the indissolubility of her espousal. The virgin is the bride of Christ. She represents the Church. She lives and loves most deeply in the sacrificial union with her Bridegroom Jesus Christ. In it she is bound and united to Him forever under all circumstances, for she desires to follow the Lamb whithersoever He goes. Her sacrificial union with Christ assumes various forms. Its highest form is martyrdom. But her one great decisive ideal, total surrender to Christ and through Him to the Father, is always present.

Ultimately the virgin's *Volo* is based on hope. St. John's saying, "It is not yet manifest what shall be" (I Jn. 3:2) also applies to the virgin. She binds herself to Christ in the sign of the cross. These bonds deliver her from all bondage and introduce her into the full freedom of God's children. Freedom and virginity intrinsically belong together. To be entirely free for Christ means to be fully possessed by Him. Where He is, where He takes full possession, one becomes free from oneself, free from the world, free for Him, and one possesses all in Him. But this will take place only when the cross will perfect the whole man in his physical death. Only in this way can he assume the aspect of glory.

What qualifies the virgin for her *Volo*? The answer to this question opens profound depths. Christ has called the virgin in an extraordinary manner. In Christ's call the redemptive will of the triune God is operative. Christ Himself in His divine-human existence is the overpowering "Yes" of God toward mankind. In Christ God gives man His "Yes" in a manner no created intellect could ever imagine. Here even love can only surmise in chaste fear and blissful jubilation.

The call of Christ to the virgin implies the revelation of the utter fullness of that consent which God speaks to man by the redemptive work of His Son. The virgin is the one chosen by the triune God to be the bride of the incarnate Logos.

Every divine call addressed to man confronts him with an inner crisis. As a being endowed by God with free will he must decide. This decision, however, presupposes that irrevocable "Yes" of God to man, which He utters in Christ. The *Volo* of the virgin marks the most important decision of her life. It is a complete summing up and coordination of faith, hope and charity. Charity illumines the darkness of this courageous "Yes" and places it under a readiness which nobody but the virgin herself can sustain. The *Volo* of the virgin is not primarily her own word. It is made possible by God through His prevenient grace, by which alone the virgin is able to make her free decision.

7 . . . LITANY OF THE SAINTS

Before the consecration proper takes place the bishop asks the virgins, "Do you desire to be blessed, consecrated and espoused to our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Most High God?" They answer, "We desire it." Then the bishop kneels, bowing low before the altar, and the virgins prostrate. After that the Litany of the Saints, a grand symbol of death and life, is sung. It begins and ends with the invocation of the *Kyrios*, the Lord of life and death. With this invocation Christ is acknowledged as He whose death and resurrection reveal the glory of His love, arousing the hope of every creature for His glory to shine forth at the end of time.

The invocation *Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison* is a petition asking the omnipotence of the triune God to manifest itself mercifully in the consecration to follow. The mystery of the merciful love of God towards His creatures is Christ as Spouse of the virgin. Between the *Kyrie eleison* at the beginning of the litany and the *Kyrie eleison* at the end of the litany the *Agnus Dei* is said. Thus the whole meaningful depth of the litany as a symbol of life and death becomes clear. Christ, the eternal Son of God, became man in the fullness of time and was led as a lamb to the sacrificial altar of the cross!

The depth which separates the words *Agnus* and *Dei* cannot be fathomed. Whenever Sacred Scripture and the liturgy speak of the Lamb of God, they wish to profess Christ, who though Himself not subject to sin, assumed sinful human na-

ture which was in Satan's power. They profess Christ, who by His obedience to the heavenly Father consented to take on weak and vulnerable human nature, healing it, sanctifying it and snatching it from Satan by the power of divine love. The invocation *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis* is the most humble and perfect praise of Christ's mystery. Only the heart touched and moved by God can utter such an invocation with its tremendous depth of meaning. The Son of God, the incarnate love of the Father, the slain Lamb shedding Its Blood to the last drop, is the truly awe-inspiring and mysterious omnipotence of God's mercy.

In the course of the litany Christ's death is mentioned. This is the mystery-laden center of the whole redemptive work. Omnipotent love removed the world's burden of sin and submerged it in the depths of self-sacrificing love to which God alone can penetrate. *Kyrie eleison, Agnus Dei, Kyrie eleison*. The whole economy of salvation is hidden in these words. Christ, Lord over life and death, destroyed death by His own death and bestowed new life on all creation by His resurrection, so that creation, now redeemed, may again serve and glorify the triune God.

The mention of Christ's death in the litany is the reason for the invocation of the heavenly hosts, of Mary, the martyrs, virgins, confessors and all the saints. They were all born in the death of Christ. They were all baptized in the Blood of the Lamb. They bear shining garments, crowns, palms, and golden thuribles filled with incense to symbolize the glory of the risen Christ. The risen Lord is the Crown of their glory, the Garment of their immortality, the Palm of their victory, the ascending Fragrance of their sacrifice. All these, resplendent in Christ unto the honor of the triune God, are invoked before the actual consecration of the virgins takes place. All of them are asked to intercede that the glorified Lamb may in-

crease His retinue through the consecration of these virgins. The whole Church triumphant is invoked, for she celebrates the triumph of the Lamb unceasingly. She is constantly engaged in giving praise to the Lamb.

The petition for the virgins about to be consecrated is contained in the Church's glorification of the Father through the adoration of the Lamb. What a forceful loving appeal ascends to the heavenly Father! Because the hosts of the saints whom no one can number glorify Christ the Lamb, their petition is at the same time a prayer through Christ the Lord. For this reason their prayer is compelling and pure. In their intercession the prayer of Christ, the Mediator between God and men, is effective, and such prayer the Father cannot refuse.

During the chanting of the litany the virgins prostrate. As miserable creatures they lie in the dust of their nothingness before the face of the thrice-holy God! Their prostration is meant as adoration, as evidence of their conscious and absolute dependence on God, as acknowledgment of guilt and as suppliant prayer for mercy. The Litany of Saints is a symbol of death and life, for it revolves around the death and resurrection of Christ. The prostrate virgins express their total surrender to Christ. They desire to share in His humiliation, amid defencelessness and outrage, through the mystery of His death in order to be irrevocably sealed in their bodily death.

Here can be applied what Cardinal Suhard says about the prostration of the priest at ordination, "He casts himself upon the pavement of the sanctuary and remains prostrate in the rigidity and silence of death, of that death, to which the Church herself binds him. This gesture of destruction he renews daily. For the priest this 'death to the world' is not something passing, but a state of being, a continual burnt-offering. The priest is as one dead among the living and will always be such" (Suhard, *Priests Among Men*, Paris, 1949).

The bishop rises, solemnly makes the Sign of the Cross twice over the prostrate virgins, chanting, "That You would graciously bless Your handmaids here present." They respond, "We beseech You, hear us!" The bishop continues, "That You would graciously bless and sanctify Your handmaids here present." Again they respond, "We beseech You, hear us!" The bishop calls blessing upon the virgins in the form of the cross. May the cross of Christ rest upon them. It is the blessed burden and their sanctification. Through the bishop, Christ desires to assume the virgin not only into the mystery of His death but also into the glory of His resurrection.

Here the words of Job may well animate the hearts of the prostrate virgins, "Even that God would decide to crush me, that he would put forth His hand and cut me off! Then I should still have consolation and could exult through unremitting pain, because I have not transgressed the commands of the Holy One" (Job 6:9 ff.). The eschatological character of the Litany of the Saints makes it possible to understand these striking words. The virgin is not opposed to dying, however God may dispose it. She knows that death comes to her as a grace, by which she passes into the light of eternal life, where the *Kyrios*, the Lord and Bridegroom, will share His heavenly Banquet with her.

8 . . . SYMBOLISM OF THE GARMENTS

The symbolism of the garments shows a deep connection with the history of salvation. The first prayer said over the garments in the consecration of virgins contains the sentence, "You have promised Your faithful the garb of salvation and the robes of eternal joy." Adam and Eve recognized their nakedness after the fall; they arrived at the painful realization that they had been robbed of the garb of divine glory and immortality. This stripping indicated their being handed over to the powers of evil, before unknown to them; at the same time it darkened their free, clear faculties of understanding. Sacred Scripture asserts that Adam and Eve wished to hide from the omnipresent, all-knowing, all-seeing God, for their garb of salvation was torn.

Nevertheless, in His plan of redemption God, wishing to show Himself incomparably generous, as the One who would give abundantly more than man could imagine, promised the garb of salvation and the robes of eternal bliss. When Christ allowed himself to be shamefully stripped of His garments, He wished to take upon Himself the shameful indignity of fallen mankind. The shocking abasement of the Lord, accepted in obedience to and love for His heavenly Father, had a redeeming power which disarmed Satan.

Christ Himself wished to be the new garment of redeemed mankind, the raiment of God's children, the royal robes of those reborn in the water and the Holy Spirit. "Put off the old

man . . . Put on the new man, put on the Lord Jesus Christ!" "For this very reason we groan full of yearning to be clothed with our heavenly 'dwelling,' since indeed only when we have put it on shall we no longer be found naked. In this mortal covering we sigh anxiously because we do not wish to be unclothed but clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. But when what is corruptible shall have put on incorruption and what is mortal shall be clothed with immortality, the words of Scripture shall be fulfilled, 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' What is corruptible must put on incorruption and what is mortal must put on immortality. But He who has fashioned us for this is God, who has given us the Spirit as a pledge" (2 Cor. 5:2-5; 1 Cor. 15:54).

These words of St. Paul make clear that the garment of redeemed mankind is Christ Himself. The putting on of the garment signifies man's taking on a new mode of being in Christ. The words "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ!" imply intimate union with Him and, quite literally, a passing into Him: "I live, but not I, Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

To all of the Lord's mysteries the virgin bears a special relationship, brought about by the grace of the Holy Spirit. She lives in them in a manner that anticipates to a great extent the state of final consummation. It is here that the virgin is still in *statu viatoris*; she is still on the way. However, her willingness to die with Christ, her readiness to steep herself in His death, answers the call of grace, so that by constant dying she gains true and perfect liberty in Christ. By surrender to the Lord's death she gains renunciation from the world; in the mystery of the Lord's resurrection she gains possession of the world in freedom from servitude to things. "Brethren, time is drawing to an end. It remains that those who have wives should live as if they had none; and those who weep as if they were not weeping; those who rejoice as if they were not rejoicing; those

who buy as if they possessed nothing; and those who make use of this world as if they did not make use of it. For the fashion of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:29-31).

These words of St. Paul speak in the first place about the relationship of the Christian to the world. The world is not the ultimate place for the Christian. It is given him by God as a time and place preceding the final era. He must take it seriously; he must endure it, use and dominate it by the power of his faith in Christ.

As has been said before, the virgin has a special relationship to the world. By renouncing the possession of the things of this world for Christ's sake she lives as one sacrificing and being sacrificed. Only by having a special share in Christ's Sacrifice can the virgin become a blessing to the world. In her undivided surrender to Christ she is like one signed and sealed by Christ, one who has accepted the sacrificial chalice from His hands, one who has begun to drink of the pain, suffering and agony of the Lord. But this chalice of sacrifice is not merely one of suffering; it also contains joy and love in full measure.

This sacrificial chalice is truly the great grace in the life of the virgin. When she drinks it her thirst increases. What she drinks will inevitably lead to death but also to an incomparably glorious life. In drinking the chalice of extreme poverty the virgin loses herself in Christ's death, and by sharing in His resurrection she becomes the transparent vessel for the nuptial joys which Christ bestows on those of undivided love. Christ loves those who drain the chalice of sacrifice.

The blessing of the virgin's garments shows the two-fold significance of bearing the passion of Christ in one's body while already being clothed in the garb of restrained joy, in anticipation of the nuptials of the Lamb. From this blessing, phrases like "garb of salvation and eternal joy," "humility of

heart and contempt for the world," "holy chastity" and "blessed immortality," which occur in the blessing of the garments, are readily understood. They refer to Christ. In Him the virgin is to be healed of the consuming malady of inordinate attachment to things of this world; in Christ she is to gain the inexhaustible ocean of joy, the clear depth of which never changes but always reflects God anew; in Christ she is to find her way back to a creature's true relation to God! The virgin wears the garment which is symbolic of contempt for the world, but, let it be emphasized, she also must love God's earth very earnestly.

The real meaning of Christian renunciation of the world is to help creation praise God. To assist in preparing the earth for the final Coming of Christ is an altogether essential aim of virginal sacrifice. Thus the virgin's contempt for the world does not imply any sort of disdain for the great and wonderful things of this world. Rather it arises from love's sovereign freedom and strength which press forward to die with Christ in order to expose the sinful world and to triumph over it, certain of the coming of the new earth and the new heaven. A silent growing love for death must be woven into the virgin's garment. Death shall be her last, highest and most personal glorification of God and at the same time her last, highest and most personal service to earth.

But all this can happen only through the power of Christ's death. In the sacrifice of her life the virgin wishes to express her last Abba-Father in the spirit of Christ, thus joyfully bringing before God the short span of her life with all its happenings, sacrifices, sufferings, afflictions and blessings. The world which was once crucified is now brought safely to eternity by grace. The virgin's contempt for the world, thus understood, can grow only out of deep reverence for Almighty God's creative will. In union with Christ the living and

dying of the virgin should become a real sanctification of the world. Thus the virgin's regard for the world, rooted in Christ, the Head of creation, penetrates her contempt for its sinful ways and rises to a superiority over it because of the growing spiritualization of her living and the pure spiritual force of her dying.

The virgin should accept and preserve the garment which symbolizes holy chastity. Holy chastity is not a gratuitous gift. It is acquired rather by a gradual maturing of the personality. It acknowledges God as the Giver of the order of sex-life but does not substitute for this order a false glorification of self. Thus understood, chastity is the spiritual force of the morally responsible personality. This force should develop into a virtue, that is, into something that leads man to highest possible perfection. The chastity of the virgin is a force which aids her in becoming a *columna immobilis*. It is sacrifice and strength that unite the gaze of the mind and heart and supply the virgin's whole life-energy for beholding the divinely pure and wonderful love which she meets in Jesus Christ and for which she exists exclusively.

The word "chastity" is often taken in a too narrow sense; it means more than what has been said above. It signifies a special form of alertness for spiritual receiving and giving. From such an interior serenity flows a certain freshness, directness and sincerity. It permits deeper human understanding and mutual confidence. No one but Christ shall penetrate that closed garden; He alone shall break the seal to the virgin's innermost self by His love.

These considerations explain the phrase "holy chastity" in the prayer over the garments in the consecration of virgins. It means not only a continual passing through self-denial, cross and death, but also being already steeped in the profound peaceful clarity of Jesus' love. He opens man's eyes, enlarges

and strengthens man's vision and allows God's infinite goodness, which no inner depths can resist, to penetrate into human wretchedness. All that which has so far been said of the virgin's garments culminates in the phrase "garment of blessed immortality." "May they whom You clothe in the habit in this mortal life, one day also be clothed with blessed immortality"

With remarkable brevity of expression these words convey the fullness and glory of the divine promise. While the virgin still treads this earth, her steps show a forceful urge to cross its boundaries. Her lofty mission lies in this world, it is true, but all she is and does betrays a restlessness that will be calmed only by contact with the eternal. All her experiences in time are permeated by a radiant hope for the coming Lord. Her awareness of the present reality is kept alert by the constant knocking of the Lord at the door of her heart "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." "Brethren, it is now time to rise from sleep! Redeem the time!"

These words of St. Paul apply in a special way to the virgin, she knows that she is living in the final era, when preparations are made for the eternal nuptials with Christ. She is joyful in anticipation of this wedding. "Redeem the time!" He is already knocking. For the virgin this means to love death as the friend of the Bridegroom. For those invited to the nuptials with Christ in eternity death bears a reflection of the joy of the Bridegroom Himself. Christ willingly met death in order to submit to it. By that voluntary subjection the incarnate Son of God desired to show Himself Lord-over death. God came into the world in Christ to lead mankind home as His bride.

But by the unfathomable decree of divine wisdom death also was to be in the bride's retinue, though no longer as the cold, powerful deceiver he had been in the retinue of the prince of this world. Now he is swallowed up in Christ's victory

for all who follow the Lamb without stain. Now death is blessed by Christ and is a herald of joy. The virgin looks for him, wants to love him as a friend of the Bridegroom. She recognizes his shadow as the approach of her Beloved. She knows that he comes to end time. Death is like the changing of the garment! The garb of what is temporal drops away; the robe of blessed immortality, of everlasting love, shines forth brightly.

The second prayer over the garments asks that they be blessed and consecrated, so that those who wear them as symbols of their holy state may be recognized as consecrated to God. The blessing and consecration of the garments sets them apart and qualifies them for sacred service. Ultimately all blessings and consecrations are radiations of the Christ-mystery, effects of the primal sacrament, for, as has been mentioned before, in the mystery of the Incarnation the human nature of Christ became the vessel of divine life which streams forth into creation. That happens chiefly through the sacraments. By them the things of this world become bearers of divine life. They are signs containing and conferring grace, so that man and all creation experience a real divinization through them.

Also the sacramentals take part in this wonderful divinization of the cosmos. Through the power of Christ's death and resurrection things of this world are gradually withdrawn from the control which God still allows Satan to exercise. The life-stream flowing from the cross spreads further and further into all the realms of creation, until in the brightness of Christ's Second Coming all the veils will fall. Then, in one unending act of glorification, Christ will give the Father all divinized creation.

It is very important to realize that in the apparently insignificant blessing of the garments something closely connected with the work of redemption takes place. The

blessing and consecration of the garments also point to the fact that the garb in which creation is vested is undergoing a change in the final era, that is, from the time of the Incarnation to Christ's Second Coming. This change is brought about above all through the Eucharist, but also through the other sacraments and through the sacramentals. It is a transformation from death to life, from corruption to incorruption, from darkness to ineffable light. Every blessing and every consecration takes place in the Sign of the Cross. Thus it becomes for every rational creature an experience that opens the door to never-ending joy unto God's glory.

The garment shows the holy state of the virgin. In this connection Athanasius Wintersig, in his book *Liturgie und Frauenseele*, refers to the "pneumatic" states in the Church. Whereas the virgin binds herself legally by vows, she is more fully drawn into the pneumatic life of the Church through the consecration. The pneumatic state of virginity signifies a personal and voluntary submission to the operations and dispositions of the Holy Spirit for the glorification of God. Hence the expression "pneumatic state of virginity" denotes something sacred and powerful, something possible only in virtue of an extraordinary call of grace, something that effects a unique and vigorous unfolding of spiritual life through Christ's mysteries.

This state of virginity denotes a separation from the world effected by the Holy Spirit with the aim of bestowing the saving spirituality of Christ invisibly upon this world. But this demands of the virgin not only that she endure the violent storms of the Divine Spirit, persevering in all His dispensations and remaining attentive to His inspirations. She must also remain steadfast amid His mighty conflagrations, receptive to His enlivening, soul-fructifying dew, become voluntarily helpless in the deep silence of His peaceful eternity

and join in the never-ending jubilation which is the Holy Spirit Himself in His blessed union of love between Father and Son. In short, being drawn into pneumatic life of the Church means to permit oneself to be altogether consumed by the fire of the Holy Spirit, when and wherever He chooses, so that the Father may be glorified.

In the third prayer of blessing over the garments petition is made for the outpouring of very abundant blessings. This is an allusion to the blessing of the robes of Aaron with ointment which flows down from his head to his beard.

The gradual climax addressing God in the three prayers of blessing over the garments is sublime. The first prayer begins with the word, "God"; the second with the words, "Lord, God"; the third with "Almighty God. . . most kind Father." All Christian prayer is made in the groaning of the indwelling Holy Spirit. In Him it becomes the expression of the innermost Christ-life in us and is directed with all its force and meaning towards God, the good Father of all gifts. Steeped in the Christ-life, our prayer merges with that mighty stream which has its source in the Father, seizes upon this creation in the Holy Spirit and, in Him, flows back to the Father as the final goal of all created things.

May the Father grant that the virgins' garments be to them "a protection unto salvation, a badge of their holy state, a beginning of sanctity, a firm defence against all assaults of the enemy." In the first prayer petition is made for the blessing of the garment of salvation. We ask that it be a protection unto salvation. Like every Christian, the virgin first received salvation in baptism. This first contact with the death and resurrection of Christ gave her a share in the life of Christ and through Him in the life of the triune God.

In the sacrament of confirmation the glory of baptism was unfolded in its fullness. Being powerfully seized by Christ in

the Holy Spirit, the virgin now possesses Christ as a weapon of light against the pernicious threats of Satan. The Holy Eucharist makes the virgin the constant guest of the heavenly Father. The Sacred Banquet is the center of her life. Joy, peace, liberty, immortality are the imperishable fruit of this Banquet. In sacramental confession the virgin presents herself to the Christ of the Parousia, who dispenses merciful judgment upon sinners, thus pointing again and again to the final judgment of all flesh. In her sacramental life the virgin becomes truly whole in the fullest sense of the word; the death of Christ is ever efficacious in her and she is incessantly taken up into the full life of the heavenly Adam, Jesus Christ.

In the consecration of virgins Christ makes the virgin fathom a depth of His death she never before sounded. But at the same time He permits her to ascend to a summit of the glory of His resurrection never before realized. The virgin's experience of Christ's mysteries is one of the most precious secrets of grace, hidden in her virginal heart and sealed from the world by the Holy Spirit Himself. In baptism the virgin put on the garb of salvation, Christ Jesus. In the consecration of virgins she is allowed to put it on once more as a nuptial garment, the fabric of which is interwoven with the Blood of the glorified Lamb. Of this the virgin must always be mindful.

Now let us consider the phrase "a protection unto salvation" from the third prayer over the garments. Regarding this garment the virgin may say with St. Agnes, "When I love Him, am I pure; when I touch Him, am I chaste; when I receive Him, am I a virgin" (Third responsory of Matins for the feast of St. Agnes). Thus Christ is the garment of salvation. May the sufferings of Christ be woven ever more deeply into the garment of the virgin, so that it will become a garment of blood. Then it will be all the more a protection against wicked assaults. Seen in this way, the garment of the

virgin becomes the symbol of her incomparable dignity.

In the third prayer over the garments the Church asks that the habit of the virgin be a badge of her holy state. The things of this world are symbolic for the Christian. They speak a language intelligible only to the believer. Their symbolism expresses their relationship to the supernatural, to Christ, the Head of creation, in whom all things ultimately have their existence. Viewed in this light, the world is a radiation of the Christ-reality and is duly coordinated with it. The garment of the virgin should be the badge of her state, that is, of the community of those who are called by God to be special followers of Christ. The garment of the virgin stands for the beginning of her sanctity. There are many ways to sanctity. There are many ways to sanctity but they all lead through the world. Christian sanctity is the real continuation of Christ's existence in a Christian in this world. A holy life is a life lived through Christ in this world; it is the consecration of all events in space and time in union with Christ.

9 . . . SACRIFICIAL HYMN OF THE VIRGIN

The virgin sings, "The kingdom of the world and all worldly ornaments have I despised for love of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom I have seen, whom I have loved, in whom I have believed, whom in love I have chosen." In this prayer the virgin, prompted by the love bestowed on her by Christ, renounces the world. We may recall St. Paul's experience of Christ, an experience beyond any he had ever had before. "What formerly counted for me as gain, that I now count for the sake of Christ as a disadvantage. In fact, I count all as a disadvantage in comparison with Jesus Christ, my Lord, whom I have recognized as far more glorious. For His sake I have given up all and count it as refuse, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him" (Phil. 3:7-9). What a new sense of values on the part of the Apostle! How much egotism must have crumbled before he could arrive at such an unerring and decisive certainty. To desire Christ and nothing else is the new life, the new love, the new existence.

The virgin's meeting with Christ in her consecration is, likewise, deeply penetrating. She says, "I have seen Him; I have loved Him; I have believed in Him; in love I have chosen Him!" Christ had lovingly looked upon the virgin. His glance meant her vocation. His look pierced and conquered her heart. His love gave her a new power of vision. That is a blessed vision but not yet the *visio beatifica*, the beatific vision of God's glory.

It is still the vision of faith by which we behold in a mirror and in a similitude, "in part," as St. Paul says. And yet He whom the virgin has seen and still sees is really Christ. She remains blissfully captive in the glance of His love. Only in such contact with Christ's love can the virgin say, "The kingdom of the world and all worldly ornaments have I despised." She is lost to the world and risen in Christ, though still carrying the world along and offering it as a sacrifice in the flame of His love. It is love that bestows, that sacrifices, that dies and yet lives. A second time the virgin repeats with touching assuredness, "Whom I have seen, whom I have loved, in whom I have believed, whom in love I have chosen."

10 . . . THE CHRIST-MYSTERY IN THE PREFACE

The heart and center of the entire consecration of virgins is the great preface. It is *the* solemn prayer of consecration. Originally it was accompanied by an imposition of hands, which expressed still more clearly that precisely here the consecration takes place. It invokes the Spirit of Christ upon the virgin constituting her formally a bride of Christ (Athanasius Wintersig, *Religiöse Quellenschriften*, "Die Jungfrauenweihe"). The consecration of virgins is performed in the form of a far-reaching solemn thanksgiving. Immediately before the consecration the bishop prays, "Let us pray. Look down, O Lord, with favor upon Your handmaids. . . ." The prayer is a humble petition that this great and holy grace of God might be received with pure surrender. The prayer further asks that we may accept God's gifts with faith and gratitude and preserve them with the strength of a pure heart (text of the preface).

The first sentence of the preface reveals the life of the Church, the Bride of Christ. She must always be grateful. She thrives on gratitude. To give thanks is her indispensable food, her innermost joy, her very life. To be a bride means to be permitted to love. The Bride of Christ, the Church, did not love first; Christ loved her first. But now, in the power and glory, in the beauty and chastity of His love, she herself is the lover. She is love itself; she is Bride in Christ's death. Christ reveals His innermost Being to her; He initiates her into

love's mystery. Christ opens her eyes to the love with which He yearns for her.

In His death Christ knows the Church just as His self-sacrificing love knows us in divine truth. But in His death the Church also knows her Bridegroom Jesus Christ most intimately. His death is her death; it is her ultimate knowledge of Him. It is her purest love, her humble gratitude. Where Christ bestows His bridal gift, that is, His Body which was sacrificed and His Blood which was shed, he lets her taste of His death. And indeed this is *Eucharistia* (thanksgiving). As lover the Church must give thanks. As dying in love with her Bridegroom she must give thanks always and everywhere. United to Him most intimately in His death she is all glorification to the Father through and in Christ. Christ joins the Church to Himself in His surrender to the Father. From her heart overflowing with admiration and adoration she exclaims, "Holy Lord, Almighty Father, Eternal God!"

Now, when a virgin is consecrated a bride of Christ, when God shows His generous love again, the whole Church must pour forth her gratitude in memory of all the great and wonderful works of divine omnipotence. When a virgin becomes a bride of Christ the whole Church rejoices, for she herself again receives new life and love from Christ. She grows and expands whenever Christ reveals Himself as the Spouse of a virgin. And that is why she gives thanks always.

In the great preface the glory of the virgin is sung in wise moderation and holy sobriety, which spring from a well-ordered living fullness of the Spirit. The true evaluation of virginity as it shines forth in the preface is based on a rapture, a seizure by Christ, which enkindles an ardent longing. Virginity is an unusually gracious meeting with Christ, an experiencing of Him. In the text of the preface virginity is seen in a sublime context: God, creation, original sin, redemp-

tion, consummation. This already indicates the important role consecrated virginity plays in the whole plan of redemption.

"By Your Word, by whom all things are made, You so restore human nature, profaned in our first parents by the wiles of the devil, that You not only recall it to original innocence, but also lead it to a foretaste of eternal blessings prepared in the new era."

This sentence opens an immense vista. Its center is the Word. By the Word all is created. It is the Father who utters the Word from all eternity. By it He expresses Himself in His Image and Essence. This personal Image is the Second divine Ego. God is a living God. The Father speaking, the spoken Word, the Love uniting Father and Son—this is the immense intensity of God's life in the absolute simplicity of His essence. The Father knows Himself in the infinity of His own essence, from which come the various ways in which He manifests Himself in the created world. "All things are made through the Word, and without the Word nothing was made of that which was made" (Jn. 1:3). Therefore all created things bear the image of the Word.

This is true in a special way of rational creatures. When this image in man was profaned by the wiles of the devil, the restoration of human nature was achieved in a most glorious manner. God united Himself forever with human nature in His Word. Thus human nature was not only elevated and restored but was stamped more distinctly with God-likeness. "O God, You have wonderfully created human nature and have more wonderfully restored it." Human nature is not only led back to its original innocence, but it is also given a foretaste of the eternal treasures prepared in the new world era.

What is the new world era? Before the eye of faith looms up the cosmic Christ-image. Christ is the Head of creation; through Him all things were created. Christ is the Father of

the new eon (liturgy of Christmas). When He assumed human nature from the Blessed Virgin Mary, through the Holy Spirit, He consecrated the whole cosmos and sanctified the human race. When during His earthly life Christ touched created things—water, bread or earth—it was no empty gesture but rather an indication of His desire of gathering up all things in the order of grace and of using material objects as sacramental signs. Thus creation was more and more snatched away from the powers of death, under the gloomy domination of which it had been since the fall of man.

The shattering of the ancient eon of sin took place particularly through Christ's death and resurrection. Christ is the Father of the new eon. *Pater futuri saeculi*. The redemptive mystery of the Incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit operated effectively through all eternity. At Christ's Second Coming will be revealed what takes place secretly in our day. The *Passio Christi* will show the old world of sin and death to all creatures in heaven, on earth and under the earth as definitely shattered. As *Pater futuri saeculi* Christ will be seen as the sanctifying, all-permeating, ever-present power of the new era, as its imperishable splendor and deepest content. "And the knees of all those in heaven, on earth and under the earth shall bend, and all shall confess: Jesus Christ is the Lord in the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10-12).

Both Old and New Testament speak of the new heaven and the new earth. They are the final maturing of what began with the Incarnation of the Son of God, continued through His death and resurrection and grew with His ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the new heaven and the new earth are the full, ripe fruit of the sacred Mysteries celebrated here on earth. They are an unending glorifi-

cation of the all-holy Trinity in the celebration of the heavenly liturgy.

By the sacrament of baptism man becomes a new creature in the new world era. This takes place in a hidden though real manner. The one baptized is submerged by baptism into Christ's death and rises with Him unto the new life, the Christ-life. "Who is in Christ is a new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17). He has received a new being, a new life, a new love. By the sacramental seal he is ingrafted into the Christ-life. Hence what St. Paul says is true of him, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

Because the baptized person lives in Christ, he is on his way to the manifest glory of the new world. Christian existence realizes its eschatological character. Whoever is in Christ lives in the final era. At the same time he already experiences the beginning of the new world era, and he already enjoys a foretaste of the eternal treasures, for in Christ we wait for Christ. Through Christ also the Father and the Holy Spirit dwell in us. Thus in Christ we wait for the full revelation of the all-holy Trinity.

What place has consecrated virginity in this plan of salvation? In virginity glows a radiant glory which came from the death and resurrection of Christ. The consecrated virgin reveals in a special way the eschatological glory of baptism. By baptism the old Adam and the old world era die in man while the New Adam, Christ, and the new world era arise in him. The consecration of virgins continues this process. Because the virgin is espoused to Christ she belongs exclusively to Him. By her continual participation in His death, she dies to the world, so that she may fully arise in Christ. The consecrated virgin, still subject to death, is nevertheless in some aspects like the angels. Thus it again becomes clear how truly virginity is a living anticipation of the Parousia.

What does this likeness of the consecrated virgins to the angels indicate? By their very nature the angels proclaim the final destiny of all creation. The reality of an angel's being is concentrated knowledge, inwardness, life, love. All this is coordinated into an immense intensity of movement, into a mighty torrent of praise to the triune God. Here is a never-ending radiation of praise from the spiritual energies of his angelic nature, and a praiseful surging back into the divine ocean of light. By his uninterrupted contemplation, the angel reveals creation's ultimate destiny. Origen says in his explanation of Ps. 118, "To men belongs the singing of psalms, but the singing of hymns becomes angels and such as live like angels." Erik Peterson expresses it this way, "Behind this may also be the viewpoint of the Alexandrian theologians, according to whom the psalm pertains to the life of the practice of the virtues; the hymn, on the other hand, to the contemplative life" (Erik Peterson, *Theologische Traktate*, "über die Engel").

As has been said, the purely spiritual essence of the angel, totally directed to God, is contemplation. The consecrated virgin, as *sponsa Christi*, is assumed into the unfathomable riches of Christ. This shows how the singing of hymns is fitting for her. She is raised to a likeness with the angels because her whole life is praise of God, and because her undivided surrender to Christ realizes by anticipation the state of the perfect creature in heaven. There is no longer a taking in marriage; there is rather, as with the angels, that immediate union with God which fills the creature completely with heavenly bliss.

What is true about the chanting of praise by monks is equally significant for the consecrated virgins. Peterson says, "The chant of the monks will always be the song of those who in their entire existence are lifted out of the natural order of

things and approach the angelic state of being. Thus their chant will always have in it something of the cosmic harmonies and the praise of the angels" (Erik Peterson, *Ibid.*).

The riches of the economy of salvation, as they shine forth in the consecratory preface, are essentially riches of grace. Grace, in the Christian sense, is God lovingly turned toward His creation and mercifully working in it. It is God lovingly calling, inviting His creature to His own life of glory. Grace, in its more comprehensive and profound sense, is God freely giving Himself to creation in Christ, elevating and deifying it. It is God coming to every man in Christ. Grace is God leading each individual man to the perfection of his being, predestined for him from eternity. Where God initiates man into the mystery of His Son's cross, grace is in its total reality, power and mysterious depth.

Since this happens when a virgin is consecrated, the preface says, "Look down, O Lord, upon Your handmaids here present, who place the vocation of their continency and their surrender to You into Your hands, from whom they received the will to offer themselves." The preface unfolds a profound doctrine of grace, namely, that God works first. Only then can the creature act, that is, enter upon an activity with God. The virgin makes her surrender, but she can do so only because God has so disposed her will. God has first loved her and by His love alone can she answer in love. God inflames her will with the fire of the Holy Spirit, so that she can say "*Volo.*" The virgin's consent, spoken in full liberty, is a result of God's grace.

Grace makes deliberate decision possible. The Holy Spirit conquers the virgin's will. Her consecration as *sponsa Christi* assumes her into a new law of life in which her will is consecrated to will what Christ wills and to love what He loves. The virgin is disposed by God to accept His love as

that holy strength by which she dedicates herself to Him. But this love is something which continues to grow, something which is constantly enkindled anew by God. God's love provides room for consecrated freedom, by which the virgin overcomes sensuality's deceptive urge for license.

Where love empties itself completely, where love, following the Lamb, suffers mortal wounds, its weakness defeats the apparent strength of the world enslaved by Satan. Where God enkindles love for virginity, all the mysteries of redemption rejoice, for they are fundamentally filled with only one thing, the loving dominion of the Lamb. In every God-given virginity the Lamb reveals Himself and prepares for virginity's perfection in the glory of the transfiguration. One might say that every time the consecration of a virgin takes place creation is driven more and more into the powers of the glory of Christ coming at the end of time. In each newly-administered consecration of virgins the whole Church rises to display anew the stigma of her love for Christ before the rejoicing hosts of heaven, before the trembling world of demons and before the expectant hearts of men on earth.

In another place in the preface we read, "*. . . tu hanc cupiditatem in cordibus earum benignus aleres, tu fortitudinem ministrares*" ("*. . . if You had not lovingly nourished the desire for it in their hearts, if You had not endowed them with fortitude*"). Here the eschatological aspect of virginity shows itself again with particular force. Human weakness avails nothing without God's help. The consecrated virgin is weak, unless God fills her heart again and again with the desire to remain completely dedicated. God nourishes the virgin's desire. He aims at the heart; He strikes and wounds it. The burn in a heart struck by God is pure yearning.

This wound does not heal as long as the heart beats on earth. On the contrary, God makes it always move with the fire of

His Spirit. The wound is nursed, not that it be healed, but that it grow larger—so large that it becomes a deadly wound. Such a death is the birth of that life which is filled with love and yet always grows richer in love. There is no longer a painful yearning for the treasures of heaven, but there is pure joy in the discovery of new breadths and depths of God's love and the certainty that they are endless.

The preface prays that God may give also the fortitude required to embrace virginity. True yearning is not without the fortitude of love. Read St. Ignatius of Antioch's letter to the Romans or that of St. Paul to the Philippians, "I have the desire to depart and to be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23). God not only nourishes a yearning but He also gives fortitude. The consecrated virgin thrives on the death-wound of the slain Lamb. It is both her nourishment and her fortitude. When God nourishes this fortitude in the virgin the whole Church rises up in the virgin, taking her adorned lamp. With its light she disperses the darkness of this world's confusion. Before her joyous advance to Christ the powers of evil, fearing the light, flee. Her strength, rooted in eternity, is stronger than the passing moods of the children of this world.

God has poured out His grace upon people in all generations under heaven, and has adopted them, numerous as the stars, as heirs of the New Covenant. But to certain ones among them who are begotten, not by blood, nor by the will of the flesh, but by the Holy Spirit, He granted an altogether special gift, virginity. These sentences again speak of the Christ-mystery. The entire ceremony for the consecration of virgins proclaims the glory of Christ and expresses the universality of His redemptive work. The death and resurrection of Christ become manifest as powers forming a new humanity, a new world, a new era, a promising future. The grace poured out over all creation is Christ Himself. He is the Father's manifest

love for the world, the saving power of the Father's love. God's grace is poured out upon all people in all generations. Christ is the heart of the world and the heart of all men.

"As heirs of the New Covenant" God adopted all men, "numerous as the stars." What is the meaning of the phrase "heirs of the New Covenant?" The son is the heir. Thus, in the first place, Christ Himself is the Heir. "Often and in diverse manners God spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets; now at the end of days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the world" (Heb. 1:1). The Son of God is Heir from eternity and the kingdom of God is His inheritance. All men share in Christ's heirdom by becoming sons of His kingdom.

This sonship was not to rest on an earthly origin. Becoming son and heir was to be a pure grace, based on the new creation, upon an act of divine adoption. Neither blood nor the flesh bestows the grace of sonship but adoption by God. Such was God's wise plan. "In Christ also we are called to an inheritance, we who were predestined according to the purpose of Him who works out all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). In Christ we are called to an inheritance because by grace we are children of God, begotten of God, reborn by water and the Holy Spirit. Children are heirs. Therefore St. Paul says to the Romans, "The Spirit Himself gives testimony together with our spirit, that we are children of God. But if children then heirs also, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:16-17).

To such heirdom belongs immortality which the Old Law could not procure. The inheritance is the kingdom, the new world, in which God rules alone and completely. Eternal life was to be given by Christ, the Mediator of the New Covenant. Therefore we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews, "Christ is mediator of the new covenant, that those who have been

called, through His death, which has taken place for redemption from the transgressions under the former covenant, may receive the promised eternal inheritance" (Heb. 9:15). St. Peter, at the beginning of his First Epistle, praises the glory of this heirdom saying, "Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has begotten us again unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto an incorruptible inheritance, undefiled and unfading, reserved for you in heaven" (1 Peter 1:3-4). The meaning of heirdom, then, is to be permitted to share in the possession of God's kingdom under His eternal rule in the inexhaustible fullness and glory of His life.

What does such heirdom mean for the virgin? Perhaps it is most clearly expressed in the above-quoted words of St. Peter. The "incorruptible inheritance, undefiled and unfading" is entrusted to her in a special manner. The virgin is heir of the Lamb. Her existence realizes itself constantly from the slaying of the Lamb. The sacrificial death of the Lamb destroys the worldly, mortal mode of existence and brings to life the incorruptible, undefiled and unfading life of God in the forms of creaturely existence. The espousal of the virgin with the slain Lamb is the unceasing co-offering of her being in the sacrificial death of the Lamb. Because the virgin is and remains saturated from the wound in the Lamb's side, because the Blood of the Lamb marks and preserves her whole being from mingling with the world, the virgin is sacrosanct; she is a vessel without blemish prepared by God Himself for the incorruptibility and immortality of the divine life.

The virgin is heir of the Lamb. This is, first of all, a blessed state of existence. But as heir of the Lamb the virgin also has the sublime mission of revealing the eschatological meaning of this heirdom. To understand this correctly we must look to Christ. He is the Heir from all eternity, the Son of God, one with

the Father. By a timeless act the Eternal Son receives from the Eternal Father His eternal divine nature. In His sacred humanity Christ entered upon His inheritance after the resurrection. At that moment the human nature of Christ was transfigured, freed from death and misery, from sorrow, pain and tears, forever taken up into the glory of God. In the glorification of Christ the Holy Spirit perfected the work of the redemption. This means that Christ's human nature has undergone the highest possible divinization since His resurrection.

Christ's human nature is no longer subject to the laws to which the body of man is subject before its transfiguration; it became incorruptible because it was drawn completely into the glory of the triune divine life. At the general resurrection the members of Christ's Mystical Body will be glorified by being made conformable to the glorified body of Christ. But the virgin, in her unbloody martyrdom, is already bearing witness to the corruptible character of the purely earthly forms of existence. Among all Christians the virgin is a sign of the great hope of the perfect state of redemption to come.

The thoughts of the great consecratory preface reveal the essence of Christian virginity in all its peculiar glory. There should nevertheless "be nobler souls who, spurning the carnal union entered into by man and wife, strive after the mystery it signifies. Without imitating what takes place in matrimony they devote their entire love to the mystery signified by marriage." To get a glimpse of the riches and glory of the mystery of which the preface speaks in this passage we must recall Pauline thought concerning this concept in the Epistle to the Ephesians. The mystery harbors within itself the Wisdom of God existing before all ages. The meaning of the mystery is Christ. Through Him all creation and the beginning and end of the world are taken up into the mystery. Christ is the Mystery, and this Mystery is an eschatological cosmic event. Already

in Christ takes place the mystery of gathering into one the whole created world; thus in Him it receives its head and its fullness" (Kittel, *Theol. Wörterbuch*, "Mysterium"). This gathering together into one is done by Christ abiding in the Church.

We now come to that meaning of the word *mysterium* which the consecratory preface conveys, namely, Christ and the Church, sacramental marriage as the image of the union between Christ and the Church, and the espousal of Christ with the virgin as an image of Christ's covenant with the Church. The glory of Christian virginity shines forth clearly in its comparison with sacramental marriage. According to St. Paul's exposition in the Epistle to the Ephesians, matrimony is the concrete image of the relationship between Christ and the Church. This imagery manifests itself in the forms of creaturely love. Conjugal life is brought into relation with Christ. In the sacrament of matrimony the personal union of the spouses is completed not only in an ordinary way but also in a transcendent way. In his entire being the baptized Christian is taken over and ruled by Christ, filled with His sacred life. The sacrament of matrimony is a further development of baptismal glory. Man and wife give themselves to each other in the manner of natural love.

However, by the sacrament they are able to give mutually far more than mere natural life. They bestow the Christ-life on each other. In the love of the husband for his wife Christ's love is present in virtue of the sacrament. This is the infinitely deep and pure love with which Christ embraces His Bride, the Church. Again, in the love of the wife for her husband Christ's love is present in virtue of the sacrament; with this love the Church, as the Bride of Christ, first loved by Him, returns His love. The surrender of Christ to the Church reaches an appalling depth in His sacrificial death. In it Christ becomes the Spouse of the Church; in it He bestows His Blood

as a bridal gift of inestimable value. The Church is Bride, since she has entered into Christ's death. Deeply moved by the surrender that is at work in this death, she gives herself up entirely to her Bridegroom. The love of husband and wife also streams forth most profoundly from Christ's Sacrifice. Sacramental marriage is the meeting of husband and wife with Christ on His cross. United in Christ the married couple effects its sacrificial union.

"There will be nobler souls," says the consecratory preface. In the light of the glory of sacramental marriage the even greater glory of Christian virginity should shine forth. The mutual exchange of the Christ-life in sacramental marriage takes place in the forms of conjugal love. But this is transitory. In heaven there is no longer a giving or taking in marriage. According to the preface the relationship between Christ and the Church is fully realized in the union of Christ and the virgin. This relationship, however, does not come about in the manner of an imitation, but assumes the form of the original.

The consecration of virgins effects a contact between Christ and the virgin by which provisional forms of human existence are overcome in a spirit of sacrifice. The consecration realizes even now in the contact between Christ and the virgin that manner of human existence which bears the stamp of the eternal. It becomes clear by the consecration of virgins that the perfect man in eternity no longer needs sacramental signs of faith. In the mature final state of his existence he has the vision of God. The "nobler souls," who represent Christ's union with His Church, are privileged and prepared by God already in this earthly life to experience man's consummated mode of existence in eternity.

Christ's direct surrender to the virgin and her undivided surrender to Him are, compared with sacramental marriage, a still stronger reflection of the glory of the mystery between

Christ and the Church. "Without imitating what takes place in matrimony, they (the virgins) devote their entire love to the mystery signified by marriage."

We spoke of the precious riches of the mystery to which the virgins devote their entire love. Only he can love the mystery who believes in it and lives it. The virgin listens to the voice of the Bridegroom with an attentive silence. This silence is wholly one of love. The love of the virgin for Christ lives essentially in silence, is nourished by silence and manifests itself in silence. The beauty and radiance of divine love so forcefully outshine any attempt to speak, that speech is no longer possible, and blessed silence spreads over the virgin's whole being. The adoring silence is a calm surrender; it is the soul's prostration before the glory and majesty of the All-holy.

Love follows the law of self-preservation and surrender, and this self-preservation is the highest form of silence. When the nights of suffering come upon us, these special nights of God, the great silence begins. The Word is here! His silence comes down upon us and into us, and we become silent in return. Here lies the mystery of love wounded by God's visitation. These wounds burn and grow deeper. Yet all such silence intimates but crudely and circumstantially the mystery of virginal silence.

In this passage of the preface reference was made to the silence of the virgin, since by it Christian virginity in its deepest essence is revealed. The law of being and of life was interpreted as surrender to the mystery, for according to the words of St. Ignatius of Antioch, "It is better to keep silent and to be, than to speak and not to be" (St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians*, ch. 15,1). Only when prostrate before Christ in deepest silence can the virgin receive Him as the Word, as the one Word of the new unending canticle. Only then can she sing. Only in such silence and song does the consecrated

virgin devote her entire love to the mystery which is indicated by matrimony. She herself enters into the mystery.

This *mysterium* between Christ and the Church reveals itself most profoundly in the celebration of the Pasch. The Pasch is a *transitus*, a passing over from death to life. By dying Christ delivered mankind from eternal death. His death bears in it all the loneliness and painfulness which are inherent in death as a result of original sin. By dying Christ willingly suffered death as no creature can suffer it. He consummated His death, uprooting death itself. He took it entirely into the service of life and transformed it into a *transitus*, the passing over to the Father. This became His surrender to the Father and glorified the Father in a special way. Christ's surrender to the Father in death bears the character of an awesome surrender.

Christ accomplished this surrender as Head of mankind, as its actual Progenitor, as its Bridegroom. The failing and gradually ebbing life of Christ on the cross is God's life-giving embrace of mankind. Christ's death is His greatest gift to redeemed mankind. By accepting this gift mankind becomes Christ's bride. Having become Christ's bride in His death, mankind must love Him. Dying, the Bridegroom called; dying with Him, mankind responds. United with Him in His death and sacrificed with Him, mankind now exists altogether for the glorification of the Father. In the celebration of the Eucharist Christ loves His Church and becomes one with her in the sacramental representation of His death. In union with His bride Christ enacts the *transitus* to the Father. The altar on which the Eucharist is celebrated is the meeting-place of Christ and the Church and of their joint going to the Father. The altar proclaims the intrinsic glory of the mystery of Christ and the Church.

To this mystery the virgin dedicates herself in complete love. At no time is she so much an image of the Church as when

she is near the altar and participates in the celebration of the Eucharist. Christ assumes her into His sacrificial death, into His *transitus* to the Father. St. Ambrose praises the virgins who are entirely dedicated to the mystery of the altar as having themselves become an altar. He says, "I may call your spirit an altar whereupon Christ is daily sacrificed for the redemption of the body. For if the body of the virgin is already God's temple, how much more so her spirit which stirs the fire in her members and, fanned by the hand of the eternal Priest, sends forth the glowing breath of divine fire? Blessed are you virgins who breathe forth immortal grace as gardens their flowery perfume, as temples the odor of devotion, as altars their sweet priestly fragrance" (St. Ambrose, *De Virginibus*, II, 18).

The preface is well aware of the fact that another mystery stands opposed to the mystery to which the virgin is wholly dedicated, namely, the mystery of iniquity. Hence the petition, "To those, then, O Lord, who implore Your help and who desire to grow strong by the blessing of Your consecration, grant the protection of Your strength and guidance, lest the ancient enemy, who assails nobler aspirations with subtler wiles, obscure the glory of perfect continence, steal into their unguarded souls and rob the virginal state of that purity which must adorn even those who are married." When the virgin is assumed into the mystery of salvation in a very special manner, when she is called to an extraordinary participation in effecting this mystery, then precisely is she sharply confronted by the mystery of iniquity. Therefore she must constantly call upon God for protection.

Nothing is more dangerous for the virgin than a sense of false security. As long as she exposes herself with deep humility to the loving glance of her Spouse Jesus Christ she is securely armed against Satan's temptations. When her heart lovingly meets the glance of Jesus she is secure beyond human compre-

hension. "May there dwell in them, O Lord, by the gift of Your Spirit, a prudent modesty, a wise kindness, a grave gentleness, a chaste freedom." This sentence speaks of gifts and fruits of the Spirit, the Spirit of Christ.

By the gift of Your Spirit

The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as the personal love of both. He is the *donum increatum*, the uncreated gift or the first gift. His procession is from eternity; hence He bears the character of a gift from eternity. Not only does Christ bestow this gift of the Spirit upon His bride, but the gift of the Spirit itself bestows upon her the gift of being seized by Christ and of being possessed of His glory. "By the gift of Your Spirit may there dwell in them a *prudent modesty*!"

Modesty is the result of discretion; it lives in the alert consciousness of having no claim against God, but rather of being permitted to expect everything from Him. Modesty is firm control of the will particularly over greed. It is the recognition of one's creatureliness which respects God's absolute right of disposing freely. It may be called a ray of poverty in spirit, which the Lord names among the beatitudes. It is not primarily the fruit of ascetical effort, but it grows out of the love which is given from above and which does not seek its own. *Prudent* modesty is not calculating modesty; rather it looks upon reality as disposed and directed by God and yields precedence to Him in all things. It is a firm belief in the primacy of divine activity in all things. Only such modesty makes fruitful activity possible.

Prudent modesty, which comes from a well-ordered relation to the world and things, is a certain lightness of spirit in one who is a pilgrim on the way to eternity. Prudent modesty does not desire to be sated by the things of this world but exercises wise moderation regarding them. It is a cautious

self-preservation, consciously keeping itself empty so as to be filled with the glory of God. Prudent modesty is the joyous spirituality of the simple man. It is the inner freedom for the *unum necessarium*, for Christ.

The prudent modesty of the virgin is beautifully expressed by two figures in the cathedral of Basle. They represent two prudent virgins. The one shelters a burning lamp with her hand while holding the other hand humbly on her breast. She is courageous but at the same time she is humbly modest. Her modesty is the prudence of serving love. The other figure represents a prudent virgin who lifts her lamp aloft with both hands. She is the virgin who carries the light on high. She represents the prudence of love which is at the same time modesty and freedom.

Wise Kindness

Wisdom is the knowledge of love; it is the way of love which sees in straits, in darkness and in bonds. Wisdom, at once the well-ordered and well-ordering knowledge of love, views the whole. It is a perception of ultimate relations and dispositions which grows cheerful in suffering. Wisdom is life springing from love and remaining ever obedient to love. Upon the miscarriage of all earthly hopes and upon the ruins of man's Babylonian exploits grows the childlikeness of the wise. Wisdom is faithful attention and humble obedience to the Logos in all that exists. It is tranquillity amid excitement.

The wise person lives a life that permeates all being, one penetrated by the creative omnipotence of the living God. The wise man scents God everywhere. He sees all being in its ultimate relation to God and shapes his life accordingly. Ultimate wisdom is total immersion in Christ, the Wisdom of the Father. "From Him (God) you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us God-given Wisdom, unto justice, sanctifica-

tion and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).

The wise man cannot but be kind. His kindness permeates him, and his confidence in it is unlimited. He must be kind to men not out of weakness but from the strength of conviction. Wise kindness can come only from a clear distinction between good and evil. It steepes everything into the mercy born of the cross. It flourishes only in the heart that surrenders itself to the power of pardoning love by which it is seized. Wise kindness is seeing and helping, blessing and suffering, with Jesus. It is being mature in the Holy Spirit. It comes from understanding the natural connection between the cross and the Holy Spirit. It is the charism of the spiritual man. Therefore it sees God, men and things in their ultimate connections and deals with them in deepest confidence in the love of the crucified Lord, who wishes to save everyone and everything.

Seen in this way, wise kindness creates an atmosphere of candor that invites one to enter, to relax and to rest. Wise kindness is an ever-limpid, gentle desire to do good. It brings peace without compromises. By its existence it proves itself to be a sound fruit of Christ's cross. Wise kindness is—and here lies concealed its gracious beauty and power—the smile of intelligent simplicity. The wise kindness of the virgin is the radiation of a very special purity which comes from sacrifice. The wise kindness of the virgin is testimony to the wisdom of the cross. Its nourishment is the *mysterium*: the sacrificial Body and Blood of her Bridegroom. It is one's attitude toward the end which shall reveal the triumph of the Lamb and His glory as the life-mystery of the new heaven and the new earth.

Grave gentleness

There is a deep earnestness in the joy of the redeemed man. It is the gravity that knows where joy comes from. "Because of the wood of the cross joy came into the whole world"

(Good Friday Liturgy). The earnestness of man redeemed by Christ comes from the ready understanding and the willing acceptance of the death of Jesus as the essential content of faith. For the Christian Christ's death is both the most serious and the most joyful reality of his life. In Christ's death he constantly experiences God's benign mercy: deliverance from sin and admission into the divine life. Grave gentleness, therefore, comes from the Christian's being signed with death. Since he is committed to Christ's death, gentleness must distinguish his being. It is the countenance of redeemed love. It is the silent triumph over the judgment. The consecrated virgin must be wise and gentle, for daily she is mystically flooded with the Blood of the Lamb in the mystery of the redemption. The Blood of her Bridegroom gives her grave gentleness, the gift received from the altar.

Chaste freedom

Chaste freedom is primarily a gift of God. It is a being free *from* something. It is being free from earthly bonds, from things which in themselves are agreeable to human nature and for which it yearns. Chaste freedom is also being free *for* something. It is complete freedom for Christ, for His love, for His word, for His will and for the celebration of His Mystery. Chaste freedom is being free *in* something. It is freedom in undivided love, in untroubled confidence, in unimpaired hope. The integrity of the virgin is her chaste freedom. This is possible only with God's help. The virgin breathes in the light of her Bridegroom Jesus Christ. The hymn for Vespers of the Ascension calls it *casta lux* (chaste light). Chaste freedom allows the virgin to be in undivided morning brightness.

The hymn of Prudentianus in honor of St. Agnes sings of the bright glow of such freedom saying, "*O Virgo felix, O nova gloria*"—"O happy virgin, O new glory . . . I become pure

when you fill my heart with the splendor of your merciful countenance. All is pure (*pudicum*) which you, O gracious one, deign to look upon or to tread upon with your virginal steps." Perhaps nowhere else has the power of the virgin's chaste freedom, received from Christ and for Christ, been sung more forcefully and profoundly. In the same hymn occurs the sentence, "You (Agnes), to you alone the Father of all has granted to sanctify even the place of impurity."

How tenderly and nobly these words express the virgin's mission in our times! The integrity, the inviolate state of the virgin, is the mystery of chaste freedom which remains hidden from the world. In such freedom the virgin sanctifies the world of impurity. She assists in freeing it from the shackles of slavery imposed by sin.

The source of chaste freedom is the cross. The cross is deliverance from sin, becoming free for God, becoming free in love. Christ assumes the bride, the virgin, into the mystery of His cross, and binds her by it for time and eternity. The experience of the cross bestows on her chaste freedom. Free and open, the virgin knows and loves in the cross. In the possession of chaste freedom the virgin is again the image of the Church, the image of Jerusalem that descends from above.

In chaste fear, in what St. Augustine calls *timor castus*, the virgin responds to the gift of chaste freedom which Christ entrusts to His bride. Fear from the point of view of reverence is fearing love and loving fear. Chaste fear arises from being touched by awe of the divine mystery, from being struck and enveloped by the infinity of the Trinity. Chaste fear, chaste wisdom and chaste freedom are the consecrated virgin's protecting and distinguishing seals of integrity and inviolability. But the glory of chaste freedom is found ultimately in the virginal union with the exalted One who, according to St. Paul, is the Spirit. Where the Spirit is, there is freedom.

"By the gift of Your Spirit may there dwell in them a prudent modesty, a wise kindness, a grave gentleness, a chaste freedom." In other words, may the virgin represent the Christ-mystery ever more truly and wisely by the Holy Spirit.

Like the sentences explained above, so also the following contain a prayer followed by an exhortation. "May they glow with love but delight in nothing apart from You" (consecratory preface). This is the greatest gift God bestows; He enkindles in His own the fire of His life. The fiery stream of the Holy Spirit is poured forth into the hearts of God's children. "The charity of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5).

The virgin is to glow with love, but she is to "delight in nothing apart from You." This is understood in the first place from the *mysterium*: Christ loves His Church in the Holy Spirit. Christ gives Himself to His Church in His sacrificial death, which took place altogether in the Holy Spirit. Christ becomes one with His Church by assuming her as His Mystical Body in the holy communion of the sacrificial Banquet. The Holy Spirit is the unifying bond between Christ and the Church. In such intimate union the Church is the Bride of Christ, surrendering herself to her Spouse by the power of His Spirit. Christ also gives Himself to His virgin in the Holy Spirit. By His sacrificial death He envelops her completely in the mystery of His love and she becomes one with Him in His death. By the power of His Sacrifice the virgin also offers her sacrifice. She "places" herself on the altar of faith, in order to be caught by the divine fire (St. Augustine on Psalm 4). Having become one flame of love with her Bridegroom, one Mystical Body whose soul is the Holy Spirit, she is a living Church.

Here again the virgin's mission becomes apparent. Seeking the death of Christ and immersing herself into it, she becomes more and more a sacrifice until she is a complete holocaust.

"Complete holocaust? The whole being inflamed, but by divine fire, the whole consumed by divine fire . . . May Your fire consume all that is mine; may nothing of mine remain; may the whole be Yours" (St. Augustine on Psalm 65).

"May they live in a praiseworthy manner, but may they not desire to be praised." What does it mean to live in a praiseworthy manner? It means to live in such a way that God's favor rests upon us. To live in a praiseworthy manner must be understood from the point of view of the *mysterium*. In baptism man gains a right to participation in Christ's Sonship. With Christ as Head, all the baptized form one entire Christ. With Him and in Him they form one mystical Person. The words of the Father, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," pertain especially to Christ and His Church. The good pleasure of the Father in His Son and in His Mystical Body manifests itself in the glorification of the whole Mystical Person of Christ by the Father. In other words, the members of the Mystical Body share in the glorification of the Head.

"May they live in a praiseworthy manner." The consecrated virgins are members of the Mystical Body of Christ. They belong entirely to Christ. The good pleasure of the Father in His Son is also His good pleasure in them. The glorification of the Son by the Father is also their glorification. Only when the virgins submit themselves completely to the will of the Father can they live in a praiseworthy manner. This is what is meant by the sentence, "May they glorify You alone by their holiness of body and purity of soul." The virgin is a chaste member of the Mystical Body. The Father glorifies the Head of that Body, and the virgin is drawn into this glorification. Her whole life is immersed in Christ's death. By dying with Christ the virgin manifests the glory of the death of her Spouse. Thus by the holiness of her body she glorifies Christ and with Him and in Him the Father. Her virginal body is a

sacrifice and will remain so in the glowing fire of Christ's own Sacrifice. What then is the mission of the virgin? It is to die.

"In love may they fear You, in love serve You." A wholesome fear is the beginning of wisdom. "Perfect your holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1)." "All fear stems from love, for he who fears, fears only the contrary of what he loves" (St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II q. 125, a. 2c). "Fear that you need have no fear. Fear God; then you will be freed of all other fear; peace and security will enter into your soul" (St. Augustine). The fear meant here is the basic disposition of the religious man. Only in such fear is man capable of real transcendence, for this fear guarantees man's liberty. It is the silent, hidden strength of his security. The virgin's fear is her spiritual rampart. Her love is a constant service, a ministering to Christ her Spouse in all His brothers and sisters.

Christ ministers to her by preparing the Banquet of His Body and Blood for her. The virgin is moved by His ministering love and as a result loves in the blissful necessity of being obliged to serve. Her service is a sharing in the mystery of her Master's growing weakness in His passion and agony. The shedding of His blood was His service to the world. By this service He wished to redeem creation from the slavery of Satan and to restore it to the freedom of serving unto the divine glory. The virgin's serving is a reflection of Christ's love.

"May You be their honor!"

Christ's honor is the glorification of the Father. This was the one goal of His whole life but especially of that hour of which St. John's Gospel so often speaks. It is the hour which the Lord calls His own. "Father, the hour has come, glorify Your Son, that Your Son may glorify You" (Jn. 17:1). These words Jesus spoke before His passion. They are His sacrificial prayer and the evening prayer of His earthly life. They introduced

the evening sacrifice, which the Lord desired to perform by His death, thereby overcoming sin's shadows in the old creation and bringing in the dawn of the new. Descending into the darkness of death, Christ sanctified the evening of the old eon by the sacrifice of His life. Christ wished to offer His sacrificial Body to the Father in the love of the Holy Spirit as a morning offering of the new eon. Thereby the Father was to receive that glorification which the old creation had refused Him by sin.

In His death and resurrection Christ gave honor to the Father through the glorification of His all-holy Majesty. In paying such honor to the Father, Christ is Himself honored. Only from this relation of Christ to the Father can the prayer of the preface, "May You be their honor," be understood. Through her espousal with Christ the relationship of the virgin with the heavenly Father shines forth anew. Because Christ's honor is the glorification of the Father, He wishes His honor to become more and more the honor of the virgin. By becoming the fragrance of His evening sacrifice the virgin is to become the wholly inviolate, worshipful morning offering of the new creation unto the glorification of the Father. Since Christ's surrender of Himself to the Father is the virgin's honor, she must allow herself to be inflamed by the Holy Spirit with a glowing zeal, in order to be made conformable to the Lord's death. Thus she shares also in His resurrection, in which Christ most perfectly becomes her honor.

"May You be their joy!"

Christ desires His own to have perfect joy. Therefore He sends them His Spirit. His Spirit is also the Father's Spirit. Christ is to be, in His and the Father's Spirit, the virgin's only joy. Hence she may not inhale the stench of the old world but only the life-giving breath of Christ her Spouse. Psalm

118 says, "*Aperui os meum et attraxi spiritum*" ("I opened my mouth and panted"). The Spirit of her Spouse desires to permeate the virgin's whole being in order to make her joy and abiding strength in her. By such strength the virgin remains young, the more she hastens towards her death. This joy is the glowing hope that she will be happy in the love that never grows old, at the marriage of the Lamb in eternity.

"May You be their will!"

Is this not the denial of one's own freedom? And yet self-will must be uprooted. So much is being said about asceticism from the standpoint of purely human efforts, of the necessity of humbling oneself as much as possible. Asceticism should rather be looked upon as a constant exercise in charity in order to acquire that openness of one's interior into which God may enter. Asceticism is a getting ready to be wholly captured and overcome by God. The words of St. Paul, "I live, but not I, Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20), speak of the complete and essential renewal of his being in Christ; but they also express the deepest meaning of Christian asceticism, namely, being overcome by Christ, through baptism, and every sacramental contact, as well as making room by one's own efforts to be entirely filled and taken over by Christ. In this way self-will is broken down.

To be in Christ means to be subjected to the will of the Father in constant loving obedience. The virgin must become so poor in regard to her will, so empty for the will of eternal love, that the will of her Lord becomes her complete joy, her whole longing. This is possible only when she realizes that her entire being must remain undividedly exposed to the sacrificial love of Christ in the celebration of the redemptive Mystery. This demands ultimate humility, ultimate obedience, ultimate consent to the cross. But the phrase, "May You be their will," is

also the promise of great glory. It promises admittance to the life of God, to the infinite breadth of His thinking and loving, a sharing in the divine vision. It promises a blessed expanding in the mystery of His freedom.

"May You be their comfort in affliction!"

God comforts differently from men. God's comfort often has a sobering effect at first, for God never comforts us so as to deceive us regarding our own situation. God's comfort actually implies deliverance from all deception and assures seeing reality as it is in the eyes of God. Paradoxical as it may seem to men, God comforts man through the cross of His only-begotten Son. The cross of Christ is man's most radical disillusionment. Here he becomes free of every illusion as to his own situation. God comforts man through the cross by leading him by it to the truth.

The cross reveals not only man's calamitous state as a sinner but also his salvation by the power and glory of Christ's passion and death. It proclaims to him the truth concerning his future; in the cross man becomes ripe for God's eternity, for the inheritance of His kingdom. Thus God comforts with the truth. Only the truth makes men free. By grace the virgin is bound to the cross. Signed with the cross, virginity is in an arresting way the disillusionment of the world. By being crucified with Christ the virgin helps to expose the sinful state of the world. Above all, her espousal to the cross shows men the way to salvation. Comforted by the cross of the living God, the virgin herself becomes the comfort of men.

Here again we see the mission of the virgin in our day. To her apply the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who consoles us in all our afflictions, that we again may be able to comfort those who are

in any distress, by the comfort by which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4). "May You be their comfort in affliction!" In the celebration of His Mysteries God provides comfort for the virgin. She should be wholly imbued by it. Because God constantly provides her with comfort the virgin is a sign of the final era. Comforted in and with Christ, the virgin unveils the future of the world, which will see the truth and the reality of its own state in the light of its Lord as He reveals Himself on the cross. And the truth and the reality will be that the world was saved by the cross!

"May You be their patience in tribulation!"

Christ is the patience of the virgin. Christ is the manifest love of the Father. True patience stems from charity. Where it arises from divine charity, it possesses a gentle and redeeming power. If Christ is the patience of the virgin, she shares in the patient power of His charity. The patience of God reveals itself most strikingly in the history of the people of Israel. God's love watched unceasingly over this people. Repeatedly God's forbearance suffered their breaches of faith, and repeatedly God's patience melted their frozen hearts. The God of the Israelites is a jealous God. He is consuming fire. His patience is a jealous love for His people and a scorching flame for His enemies. Psalm 132 sings of this patience of God, "*Quoniam in aeternum misericordia ejus*" ("For His mercy endures forever"). The word "forever" implies the infinitely patient mercy of God.

The full revelation of God's patience took place in Christ, in whom appeared God's grace and benevolence toward mankind. Christ patiently carried mankind's burden of sin to the very wood of the cross. With infinite patience Christ remains our advocate with the Father. In His oblation sin and guilt are consumed, for Christ's patient love is a pardoning love.

In tribulation Christ is the patience of the virgin. When God sends her suffering she suffers in union with Christ. As the patience Christ showed in His suffering was a pardoning love, so also the virgin's patience in tribulation must be a pardoning love. The patience of Christ is rooted most deeply in His obedient surrender to the will of the Father, and it radiates peace. If Christ is the patience of the virgin, she should bring peace wherever she goes by sharing in His patient love. If Christ is the patience of the virgin, her peculiar strength will also be the strength of hope. Christ is the hope for glory in the virgin. She endures her suffering and misfortune in hope for the approaching glory of the Last Day, when suffering, lamentation and death will be forever overcome by the Lord's love. If Christ is the patience of the virgin, then how well the phrase, "We exult in tribulation," applies to her, for tribulation works out patience, patience endurance and endurance hope. Hope does not disappoint, for the "charity of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who is given to us" (Rom. 5:3-5).

"May You be their defence in injury!"

God's protection differs from that of the world. He protects by the power of His charity, which all the demons fear. Especially when God's love became manifest in the Sacrifice of His Son on the cross, Satan and his followers experienced impotence and hopelessness. Christ hung on the cross defenceless and powerless. He was the Lamb that was slain. The Blood of the sacrificial Lamb was the salvation of the world and remains its protection against Satan's assaults. The blood of the slain lambs on the doorposts was for the Israelites in Egypt a saving protection, the security of their freedom. This blood was a symbol of that redemptive protection which God wishes to bestow on all mankind in the passion and death of

His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. The Blood of Jesus is the price of man's freedom.

The consecrated virgin is God's protégée. By partaking in the death of her Christ from the chalice of the New Testament she is protected and becomes invincible, for her defence is Christ, who passed from death to life. Being consecrated to the same death in the Blood of the Lamb, she exercises a special power of praise which springs from the joy of life and disarms her opponents. The Acts of the Apostles (4:13-22) narrate how Peter and John stand before the council. Being forbidden under threats to teach in the Name of Jesus, Peter and John answer, " 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, decide for yourselves. For we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.' But they after threatening them, dismissed them, not finding any way of punishing them because of the people; for all praised God for what had come to pass." In this glorification the glorious power of Christ's charity, which overcomes Satan, is active. Unified with Christ in His death, the virgin is under the protection of His charity and must give praise always and everywhere.

"May You be their food in fasting!"

Fasting is a determined control of the body with its inclinations and passions. It helps the spirit to rule over the body, for it eases the weight and dullness of what is corporal. It aids to gain freedom from things. But all this is not decisive. For the Christian fasting implies a conscious placing of things of this world at a proper distance. By fasting the Christian beholds with the eyes of faith that state of the world in which the presently valid laws of life will no longer hold. It is that world in which the one law of life is the risen Christ. There what is corporal will not fade away; rather it will receive a form of existence in which the Spirit of the risen Lord will effect a

readiness of the body for the divine glory. Then it will be manifest that the body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body (cf. 1 Cor. 6:13).

There is also a fasting of the spirit. This implies keeping all one's powers under control, disciplining all one's faculties, commanding one's imagination, renouncing all that is distracting and external. Such fasting means abstaining from what is un-essential and concentrating on the *unum necessarium*, God. By such fasting the spirit becomes supple and free. It loses its hardness; it is opened to God and is ready for the reception of truth. The spirit renews its power to admit the truth and to be ruled by it.

The fasting of the virgin bears the character of the final state. It is a preparation for the wedding feast of the Lamb and therefore bears a festive aspect. The ultimate meaning of the virgin's fasting lies in becoming hungry for the one true Food, the sacrificial Flesh of the Lamb, and in becoming thirsty for the sacrificial Blood of Christ. Christ is the Food of the virgin. Even as natural food that is eaten is transformed into living substance, so Christ transforms the virgin more and more into Himself. The fasting of the virgin urges the world to prepare for the wedding in eternity, where satiety is reached in the overflowing bounty of God's house.

"May You be their medicine in sickness"

Christ is the heavenly physician. The human race suffers from the sickness of sin. Christ came and allowed this sickness unto death to work itself out in His own flesh. This took place most profoundly on the cross. By His death Christ made this deadly sickness harmless down to its root. In the mysteries of His Church He has prepared heavenly medicine to heal the wounded, to raise the dead to life. There are deep hidden wounds within man.

There is also the wounding through love. Of this the heavenly physician Jesus Christ is Himself the cause. From the depths of unfathomable divine purposes He desires to lead man to a completely sound life, no longer destructible by death. For this work of the divine physician the virgin must be ready and receptive in a special way. When Christ wounds His bride by His love, her pains have a sweet power. They are secret fires into which God casts the sins of the world, that they be atoned and consumed by vicarious, charitable suffering. In the saving mysteries of His passion and resurrection Christ desires to wound His bride so that she, like Himself, becomes a medicine for an ailing world.

"May they possess all things in You, whom they love above all.

Through You may they keep what they solemnly assumed as their vocation."

Seized by Christ and possessed by Him, the virgins now possess Him and all things in Him. These words remind us of St. Paul when he says, "All things are yours, you are Christ's and Christ is God's" (1 Cor. 3:23). Completely transformed into the Christ-mystery, sharing in the kingdom of her Bridegroom, the virgin is now also queen. She possesses all things in Christ. She is filled with the glory of the Lord; she shares His Lordship in love. This is the fulfillment of what has been said about her sharing in the divine nature. Dying with Christ she imposes destruction on the world of sin. Rising again with Him, she calls forth the new eon of light, life and love.

To possess all things in Him ultimately points to the triune God. Through, in and with Christ, the virgin participates in the life of the Trinity. Through Christ she breathes with God and in God, and through Christ she loves in God and with Him. She shares in God's knowledge and love and sees herself as an object of the divine knowing and loving. She is

included in the divine intercourse of eternal love. Into her the Father and Son breathe the flaming breath of their love, and, enkindled by this divine fire, she loves God. "Through You may they keep what they solemnly assumed as their vocation." In His divine omnipotence God bears up the weak creatureliness of the virgin, so that she is not crushed by uncreated glory but allows it to flow freely into her, finding her bliss in it.

The last sentence of the great consecratory preface might be summed up as the expectation of eternity. Numbered among the wise virgins (*puellae*), may they await the arrival of the Bridegroom with certainty; burning lamps in hand, may they hasten joyously to meet Him. In a few moments the espousal of Christ with the virgin, which finds its deepest realization in the Eucharist, will be celebrated. The final words of the preface make one sense not only the restlessness, the urgent expectation and the glow of longing, but also the holy orderliness, the tense self-possession, the prudent discipline and the ready humility of this phase of the consecration immediately preceding the climax. What is to take place in a few moments can in no way be coerced but happens entirely from the mystery of God's liberty. Hence all is so real and true. With certainty the virgin hastens to meet her Bridegroom. She is retarded by nothing in the world. She ventures into far horizons. Whoever goes forth at the call of Christ gains a certainty beyond any natural explanation, the certainty of a love strong as death.

In the subsequent words of the preface the threshold to the perfection of the mystery is revealed, "May they not be shut out with the foolish but with the wise virgins freely enter through the royal gate." Let us once more recall the names which were given to the virgin during the ceremony of her consecration: wise virgin, daughter, elect, beloved, bride of Christ. Before the march through the royal gate the virgin appears as

puella sapiens, wise maiden and wise virgin. Here we note an ascending gradation: maiden, virgin, childhood, growth, maturity! The wisdom of the virgin is matured under the sun of grace. Her wisdom consists in fixing the last unfaltering glance of her whole being on the royal gate. It is love embarking on a decisive venture; it is a plunge into death. This is the wisdom that endures in the unreserved acceptance of death and in the expectation of eternity. The virgin's continual dying is her virginal consent to Christ.

She steps freely through the royal gate; she plunges into Christ's death and receives her anointing and consecration as the royal bride who is called to share in the supreme power of the Lamb. Passing through this gate the virgin becomes free. She is, in turn, wise maiden, wise virgin, queen in freedom. This is the final mighty climax in the consecratory preface and the expression of the strong eschatological anticipation in the consecrated existence of the virgin.

The gate of the eternal King and Bridegroom is opened and gives admission into the heavenly Jerusalem. Everything now expands into the infinite expanse of God, into His perfected beauty, into His resplendent glory, into His eternal love. Now the phrase "to follow the Lamb" comes true. With the word "eternally" at the close of the preface all human standards and concepts disappear. The eternal following of the Lamb is the inexhaustible mystery of Christ's glory. In such eternal following the virgin will receive her virginity as an ever new gift, as an eternal fruit, as an unending enjoyment of the glory of the Trinity. This is the wedding feast of the Lamb.

11 . . . TAKING THE VEIL

The consecration of virgins is Christ's espousal with the virgin. Veil, ring and crown are symbols of the interior glory of the bridal relationship between Christ and the virgin. After pronouncing prayers of blessing over these insignia the bishop bestows them. The virgin responds to the distinction bestowed on her by Christ.

The bishop's prayer of blessing reads, "O God, Head and Savior of all the faithful, sanctify with Your right hand these veils, which Your handmaids desire to place upon their heads for love of You and of Your Mother, the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, and under Your protection may they always preserve blamelessly in body and in soul what these veils mystically signify, so that, when they shall come to the eternal reward of the saints, they may be found ready with the prudent virgins and, under Your guidance, deserve to enter into the nuptials of eternal happiness."

This prayer speaks of the veil in connection with Christ's relationship to His Mother Mary. The relationship between Christ and Mary is veiled in mystery. Mary is the Mother of Christ. She is at the same time the Bride of the incarnate Logos. As the Bride of the incarnate Son of God, Mary is the prototype of the Church. Both the motherhood and the bride-ship of Mary are the work of the Holy Spirit. Mary uniquely bears in herself the mystery of God's love.

The veil points to a mystery that remains secret. The bless-

ing of the veil for the virgin signifies her election to brideship with Christ. May the virgin preserve blamelessly that which is mystically understood by the veil. The veil over the mystery in the relationship between Christ and Mary is also spread over the mystery of Christ's brideship with the Church. The virgin is to keep the veil spread over her consecration as *sponsa Christi* and as an image of the Church, since it guards the precious mystery of the love that reigns in her.

As has been said, her espousal with Christ has its reality from the omnipotence of the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the relationship between Christ and the Church is represented by such an espousal. The veil covers and guards the holiness of love which is here at work. May the virgin preserve this veil. As a wise virgin she is "to remain under the veil," so that, hidden to the world, she may be altogether open to Christ her Spouse. Beneath the veil the virgin awaits the nuptials of eternal bliss, which begin when Christ leads her home at the end of time.

The bishop introduces the bestowal of the veil with the words, "Come, My elect, I will set up My throne in you. For the King desires your beauty. Hearken, daughter, and see and incline your ear. For the King desires your beauty."

"Come!" This is the call of God who elects and invites. In this word the depths of God's kind work are revealed. This is the call of God who has come in Christ that we might come to Him. It conveys the love of God wooing His bride, the yearning of the heavenly King for her. In the invitation, "Come, My elect . . ." the act of God by which He allowed His yearning to shine forth mysteriously by becoming man is alive. The death on the cross was the call to mankind. This call is also a promise of Christ's coming at the end of time and of our going to meet Him in the joy of the approaching con-

summation. For the virgin this call now graciously opens the Christ-mystery.

"The King desires your beauty." Here the virgin may think of the question "What is man that You are mindful of him, O Lord?" God longs even for man. This reminds us of the mysterious phrase *Nigra sum, sed formosa* (I am dark, but lovely). As a creature in the poverty of his nature man is dark in comparison with God's infinite brightness. By his nature man is dark through frailty and guilt, sin and suffering. Man's lack of love is the darkness into which Christ, the Light, came. Christ became a curse for our sake. As St. Paul says, He became sin for our sake. His suffering pierced man's darkness and overcame it. His cross won a victory over the darkness of mankind. Because God's countenance shines upon man in Christ, man again has form, countenance and beauty.

Though man is snatched from the darkness of sin, he remains in the darkness of his own creatureliness. "The King desires your beauty." Christ longs for His bride, mankind, whom He freed from the darkness of death on the cross. Christ lets His bride shine in the mystery of His own beauty, which beams from the poverty of her creatureliness, from the darkness of her human frailty. To the virgin is said, "The King desires your beauty." In her Christ beholds His Church. In her He recognizes the will of the Father as fulfilled by Himself. She is the second creation which shines more gloriously than the first. The virgin is Christ's beautiful bride, born of His death. Nevertheless of her it can be said, "*Nigra sum*". She remains marked by the shadow of Christ's death, though now the darkness of the elect is a grace. It is the grace of being allowed to die with Christ in order to be united with Him as His bride.

"Come, My elect, I will set up My throne in you, for the King desires your beauty." As bride of Christ the virgin is

initiated into the mystery of His sovereignty. Christ grants His bride a share in His glory. The virgin is handmaid, bride, queen. She is called to rule with Christ. But the words "I will set up My throne in you" also mean that the virgin can rule with Christ only if she serves Him. "To serve God is to be king." Thus the virgin responds to Christ's invitation, "I am the handmaid of Christ; therefore I conduct myself as becomes a handmaid." She pronounces these words on her knees. To the longing of the Bridegroom for His bride she can only respond on her knees in readiness and in obedience, "*Ancilla Christi sum*" ("I am the handmaid of Christ").

After that the bishop asks, "Do you desire to persevere in holy virginity, which you have vowed?" "We desire it," the virgins answer. The decision has been made, and the virgin casts herself at the Lord's feet as handmaid and bride. The dialogue between the bishop and the virgin was the dialogue of Christ and His bride. It explains the deep symbolism of the veil. The veiling of the virgin takes place with these words, "Receive the holy veil, which shows that you have despised the world and have subjected yourself in truth and humility and with all the strength of your heart as a bride to Jesus Christ. May He preserve you from all evil and lead you to eternal life."

What a reception! Receive with this veil concealment from the world as a grace of God! Receive with it the Christ-mystery as the unveiling of God through Christ. Receive the *holy* veil! Truly, nothing profane is here received. The blessing makes the veil a symbol. It points to the bridal Christ-mystery. Christ conceals His bride in His love and takes her away from the world, casting the veil over her as a sign of His watchful, jealous and protecting love. Christ conceals His bride because He desires to reveal Himself to her. Christ covers her head so that no earthly deception may blind her.

Christ's countenance alone shines for His bride. Christ veils His bride, hiding her in the joy of holy hope. One day all coverings will fall so that God may be seen as He is. Christ bestows the veil on His bride that she may be entirely subject to Him in love. The virgin gives her consent so that she may exist only for Christ, surrender to Him, obey His will alone in truth, humility and her heart's strength.

At the bestowal of the veil the virgin replies, "He has placed a seal upon my forehead, so that I may admit no lover besides Him." These words express the unique beauty and significance of the veiling of the virgin. The veiled virgin is sealed by Christ; that is, she is taken over as Christ's personal possession. The seal bears the image of Him who seals. Here again it is plain that the blessed veil is a sign of the Christ-mystery. The sealing of the virgin by Christ is to make her deaf to the allurements of the world. She belongs exclusively to Christ. The words of the Cantic of Canticles in the Old Testament apply to the virgin. "You are an enclosed garden, my sister, my bride, an enclosed garden, a fountain sealed." (Ct. 4:12).

In a concluding prayer the bishop asks for the veiled virgin the grace to preserve unscathed under God's protection the state of virginity, which she took upon herself by His inspiration.

12 . . . ESPOUSAL OF THE VIRGIN

The bishop blesses the rings with the words "Creator and Preserver of the human race, Bestower of spiritual grace and Dispenser of human blessings, send forth Your blessing upon these rings, that those who wear them may be fortified with heavenly strength, preserve unbroken faith and sincere fidelity, keep their virginal state as brides of Christ and persevere in perpetual chastity."

May those who wear the ring be strong with a heavenly strength. The ring is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, who is the heavenly strength. He is the bond uniting the Father and the Son. In Him Father and Son are united in mutual love. In Him Father and Son behold each other in infinite clarity, purity and joy. May the Holy Spirit, the heavenly strength, confirm the virgin in her fidelity to Christ her Spouse. It is the Holy Spirit to whom Christ gives His bride, that she may give herself to Him. He it is in whom Christ longs for her and in whom He desires her beauty, so that she may yearn for Him, the Source of her beauty.

In the Holy Spirit the virgin keeps her fidelity to Christ unbroken. This fidelity is altogether pure and above suspicion. It is the fidelity which faith begets and love confirms. To unbroken fidelity belongs a holy simplicity. *Fidelitas sincera*, pure, upright fidelity has become part of the virgin's very being. Fidelity understood in this way is a complete entrusting of self, a concealing and hiding of self in the abyss of divine

love. In such fidelity the virgin may say with St. Paul, "I am convinced; neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things future, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord" (Rom. 8:37-39).

The fidelity of the virgin is a response to the fidelity of Him whom she has chosen, who awaits her, who has prepared the wedding garment and the wedding banquet for her. It is her obedient love for Christ. As a seal of His fidelity He has moistened her cheeks with His Blood (Office of St. Agnes). The fidelity of the virgin is being tried as gold in the furnace. Enduring sacrifice preserves and protects bridal chastity. Virginity is martyrdom. God's love guarantees it as a bloody or unbloody testimony springing from sacrifice. The oration in the blessing of the rings prays for endurance in martyrdom in whatever form God may send it.

As the bishop bestows the rings the espousal takes place. The bishop's words, by which Christ calls the virgin, "Come, beloved, to be espoused; the winter is past, the turtle-dove calls, the blooming vineyards give forth their fragrance," are very tender. Taken from the Canticle of Canticles, these words reveal the whole inner glory of what is about to take place. They are thought and spoken by love. Love reveals and conceals, is speech and silence, rejoices and is silently jubilant. God told us by the Incarnation of His Son that love is His innermost mystery, the mystery for which all things ultimately exist. Also evil, sin and Satan himself, exist to serve this mystery. Men exist because of love. Christ, the incarnate Love of God, fulfills the meaning of our existence.

"Come, beloved . . ." The Son of God, your Spouse, has come! The winter of the soul is over. Inner coldness is gone, rigidity is relaxed, bleakness and barrenness are removed. The

ice of creation, hardened by the darkness of sin, is broken by the cross. By His resurrection Christ lifted creation into the eternal spring of His divine glory. Christ calls the virgin to Himself. The breath of the new creation blows in this calling. The turtle-dove calls. Divine love is alluring. The breathing of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, is gentle but all-powerful.

Christ calls His chosen one through His Holy Spirit. He puts a new song into her heart, which responds to the song of His love. For the consecrated virgin the vineyard fragrant with blossoms is the mystery of the cross. The cross itself is the vine from which the over-ripe grape, Christ, is picked and pressed out. When Christ's blood bedewed the cross, new life came to its dry wood, making it the fruitful vine. Wherever the virgin meets the cross she is permitted to taste of the fiery wine of the grape which is Christ. The wine which the virgin is allowed to receive from the vine of the cross is nuptial wine. Christ reveals the cross to His bride, the virgin, as a nuptial gift.

With his right hand the bishop takes the ring, and with his left he takes the right hand of the virgin, putting the ring on the ring-finger of the virgin (The Roman Pontifical). Doing so he says, "I espouse you to Jesus Christ, the Son of the Most High Father, that He may keep you unharmed. Therefore receive the ring of fidelity, the seal of the Holy Spirit, that you may be called the spouse of God and, after you have served him faithfully, you may be crowned eternally. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." He who is really performing the ceremony is again Christ acting through the bishop.

Only by viewing all the parts of the ceremony in their proper inter-relation can we truly grasp what happens during this prayer. The consecration takes place during Holy Mass, when Christ meets the Church, His Bride, in order to live with

her the union of love in His sacrificial death and resurrection. "I espouse you to Jesus Christ." Christ espouses the virgin. From the depth of His death and resurrection He allows the living union with His bride, the chosen virgin, to take form. The eternal King satisfies His longing for His bride by giving Himself to her in glowing surrender, as it is blissfully real in the sacramental presence of His death. Christ gives Himself to His bride in an altogether ineffable way of love as sacrificial Food and Drink. In the Office of St. Agnes we read, "His Body is already united to me; His Blood has moistened my cheeks." This also happens in the *consecratio virginis*.

How often in the consecration of virgins the word *Accipe* (receive) occurs! It is always the love of God which desires to give through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Christ gives His bride the ring as symbol of His fidelity. The fidelity is shown anew, when He gives her His sacred Body and offers her the chalice of His precious Blood. The virgin's fidelity lies in her readiness to accept willingly Christ's invitation to His Sacred Banquet. "Receive the seal of the Holy Spirit, that you may be called the bride of God." Thus the union of the virgin with Christ in the love of the Holy Spirit becomes the image of the union of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.

When the bishop has put the ring on the virgin's finger, she sings: "I am espoused to Him whom the angels serve, whose beauty sun and moon admire" (Office of St. Agnes). She then raises her right hand, adorned with the ring—a glorious symbol of the Church. In the subsequent prayer of blessing Christ spreads His helping and protecting love over the virgin, so that she will keep her promise, love chastity, suffer patiently, and finally receive the crown of virginity.

13 . . . CROWNING OF THE VIRGIN

The bishop blesses the crowns of the brides with the words, "Bless, O Lord, these crowns and grant through the invocation of Your Name, that all who will wear them may merit, after serving You faithfully, to receive the crown in heaven, which these crowns signify. Who in perfect Trinity live and reign God forever and ever. Amen."

In the natural order veil, ring and crown have a real significance. They help to explain the meaning of human existence in its roots. By the episcopal blessing they are assumed into the reality of the redemption, where they become signs of man re-created in Christ. Veil, ring, and crown are symbols of man's profoundest relationship with the triune God. Holy Scripture often speaks of the crown. It is a sign of glory which ultimately points to God, who is uncreated glory. A crowned man appears as one called by God to rule. Man in sin is as one dethroned and without a crown. By His redemption Christ bestowed on man the crown of eternal life. The passage in the history of the passion which touchingly tells of Jesus' crowning with thorns actually speaks of the realization of salvation, of the rehabilitation of human nature, of man's restoration into a God-given kingdom. Since Christ's crowning with thorns Christian crowns and wreaths bear a special reference to Christ's passion and sacrificial death. They remind the Christian that entrance into glory is possible only through suffering and death. Participation in Christ's passion alone

promises glory and the incorruptible crown of eternal bliss.

The symbolism of the crown leads us again to the real theme of the consecration of virgins: the unfolding of the Christ-mystery. To His bride Christ entrusts the deepest mystery of His love, His death. The consecrated virgin is in a special way privileged to share in Christ's passion.

The bishop blesses the crown for the virgin. By this blessing Christ not only desires to initiate her into the mystery of His crown of thorns, but also promises her a share in His kingdom. The bishop calls the virgin, "Come, bride of Christ, receive the crown which the Lord prepared for you from eternity." At the bestowal of the veil the bishop called the virgin with the words, "Come, My elect!" At the giving of the ring he said, "Come, beloved." The veiled virgin adorned with ring and crown is now altogether a bride. She is the elect and beloved of the Lord. In the virgin so richly endowed with the grace of Christ the glory of redemption reveals itself.

To be chosen by God from all eternity, to be loved in God's love and thereby re-created unto a new life, to be called to brideship with Christ by God's lavish generosity—this is what it means to be redeemed. "*Veni, sponsa Christi!*" ("Come, bride of Christ!") God calls the chosen one "beloved" that she may feel His nearness in Christ. This happened once and for all in the Incarnation when the Son of God united Himself to human nature in a bridal relationship. St. Augustine says, "The Bridegroom is the Word, the bride is the human flesh; these two in one is the only Son of God who is at the same time the Son of Man. When Christ became Head of the Church, the womb of the Virgin was the bridal chamber according to the Scriptures: 'He comes forth as a Bridegroom out of the bridal chamber, as a giant rejoicing to run His course'" (Sermon on the Wedding Feast of Cana).

"Receive the crown of virginal excellence," says the bishop.

"As you are crowned by our hands on earth, may you deserve to be crowned by Christ with glory and honor in heaven."

These words remind the crowned virgin of the kingdom of the Lamb. The liturgy of the transfigured kingdom in eternity is the full unfolding of Christ's glory amid the innumerable hosts of those who willingly followed Him on earth. Through Christ, then, the divine splendor shines upon the perfected Church. What the virgin's veil, ring and crown signified on earth is now manifested and realized in the Church forever sanctified. The veil as symbol of self-concealing humility is now a concealing cover for the awe with which the whole Church trembles at the sight of the unveiled Lamb. The ring, which the virgin wore on earth as symbol of her indissoluble union with Christ in the sacrifice of love, now appears in the celebration of the marriage between the Lamb and the Church. The crown, which was for the virgin on earth the sign of her call to the sacrifice and of her still hidden union with Christ in glory, now shines in unfading beauty as revelation of the victory which the whole Church gained through her being sacrificed with the Lamb.

Under the symbols of veil, ring and crown the virgin represents the suffering Church on earth. In eternity the virgin will respond to the Lord with the hymn of praise which, according to the words of the Apocalypse, the whole Church will sing, "Alleluia, the Lord our God, the Almighty, now reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give glory to Him; for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His bride has prepared herself. She was permitted to clothe herself in fine, radiant linen. The linen garment is the righteous deeds of the saints. And he said to me: Write: Blessed are they who are invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb" (Apoc. 19:6-9).

In the concluding prayer of blessing at the bestowal of the crown the bishop again asks for the full power of divine pro-

tection. The Church esteems virginity as something most precious wrought by God. Hence her prayer to God, that His work may remain unharmed, that the virgins may persevere in their state with full fidelity and remain spotless through our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus the consecrated virgin is to perform and safeguard in a special way the glorification of God on earth. It is to announce untiringly to the world that the honor of God is the one and only reason of our existence.

14 . . . THE VIRGIN'S HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

The glory of Christ has touched the virgin's innermost heart, has transformed her into a bride, a living symbol of the *Ecclesia* and a herald of Christ's Parousia. And now she must sing, "*Ecce!*" How often the liturgy uses this word! It is an appeal for the reverent praise of God's mighty works and wonderful deeds. It speaks of the experience of God's presence, of the unceasing working of His love. But this *Ecce*, this summons to behold, should concentrate on Christ, the image of the invisible God. The virgin is espoused to Christ; but notice how He lets His love become for her a living, a loving and a dying, as well as her deepest security and freedom. Behold with the eyes of faith and love, and you will see Him whom your soul loves; the virgin will draw into her indescribable joy those who take part in her espousal to the Lamb.

"What I have longed for I see." This word *concupivi* (I have longed for) can only be understood with reference to Christ, who reveals the truth we cannot fully grasp in this life, namely, that God longs for men. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that the world may not perish, but have eternal life." And Christ says, "Most ardently have I desired to eat this supper with you."

In Christ God's longing for men became the mighty stream of His life and love penetrating into all creation. Christ is the movement of eternal love by which creation was awakened to a pure yearning for the prime source of all life and love.

The love of God, longing for His own creation, has fructified it, so that now it is in travail (Rom. 8:23). In the virgin God allows His longing for the homecoming of all creation to become a glowing power by which she longs for the lasting possession of love.

With all that has been said we must not forget how weak and empty the word "longing" is to express how God is drawn to mankind. In Christ two mighty movements meet; in Him God draws near creation, enters into it, dwells in it and remains in it. In Christ man draws near to God and is permitted to abide in Him. The virgin is in Christ in the manner of His giving Himself to her and of her surrender to Him. She is plunged into the stream of love, which is the Spirit of Christ. The virgin sings, "What I have longed for I see." She yearns and already she possesses. But her love is not yet perfect; it is still retarded by the darkness of faith. Faith and hope pass away and love will unfold its full strength. Yearning will cease with admission into the infinite life of the triune God.

"What I hoped for I possess." The virgin hoped for Christ, for inseparable union with Him. She hoped for initiation into the deepest mystery of love, His holy cross. She hoped to be permitted to suffer and die with Him, so as to be enabled to love Him more. Even now she possesses Him. But since she possesses Him in love, He again becomes a new hope for her. The words "Christ in you, hope of glory" (Col. 1:27) show that in the virgin Christ Himself is the hope for Christ, for the revelation of His glory.

In the manifest glory of Christ the virgin hopes to behold the Father directly and thereby to be taken up into the blessedness of the triune God: "I am united to Him in heaven, whom I have loved on earth with utmost devotion." By her consecration the virgin is already in a certain way taken out of this world, and in a large measure she already anticipates a heaven-

ly mode of existence. Complete seizure by Christ and undivided surrender to Him, being united with the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit—that is heaven. “Your life is in heaven,” says the Apostle. This is true for all who are baptized but in a special way for the virgin. She has left the world and belongs to Christ; for her Christ is heaven and the way to heaven.

15 . . . CONCLUDING PRAYERS OF BLESSING

The end of the ceremony draws near. In the concluding prayers familiar motives are heard again. Between the ceremony of the consecration and the celebration of the virgin's inseparable union with Christ in eternity many trials appear. Bold surrender is demanded until death. Yet the ceremony of the consecration does not break off abruptly. Rather as a mighty stream flowing in the dark it carries the consecrated virgins along through abysses threatening destruction, eventually to bear them up out of a glorious grave into the bright glory of a new life. In the final orations especially one senses the urgent, glowing expectation, the sharp looking-out toward the east, *ad orientem*, towards that holy, open expanse of the Last Day. This Last Day is not just the end; it is rather the final transformation of creation into the new heaven and the new earth, effected by the powers of light that issue from Christ in His Second Coming.

The first of the concluding prayers of blessing is an impressive oration. It begins, "O God, the Moulder of bodies and Infuser of souls!" Christ is the image of the Father. In Christ the whole man, body and soul, was made God-like. God is the Moulder of the body. He forms the human body and transforms it into a likeness of the glorified body of Christ. God infuses the soul and calls it to intimate union with the eternal divine Spirit. He lets the virgin truly be flooded with the life-giving light of His incarnate Word. The body and soul of the virgin inhale the immortality of Christ.

The opening address of the oration comes from a deep faith in the far-reaching, all-embracing divine operation. Faith, making answer to the incomprehensible glory of God, dares to petition, "Cover with the strength of Your protection . . . Prepare them with wisdom . . . Give them powerful weapons of the Spirit." May the all-good God grant that the virgin may merit inseparable union with Christ. These words are the core of the oration. In them lies the eschatological trend of the oration. Inseparable union with Christ is reached only in eternity. During her earthly life the virgin must remain buried in Christ's death till all the obstacles to the final and lasting union are overcome. This inseparable union with Christ engages all the forces of the virgin's body and soul. Christ truly wishes to permeate, fill and possess His bride, so that in His possession of her she may possess Him. Thus His knowing and loving become her knowing and loving; His surrender to the Father becomes her surrender to the Father through Him.

The glory of the exalted Christ will be the source of life and the resplendent garment of the virgin. His love will be her power of vision, her new song, her blessedness. However, the virgin is still on the way. Hence she stands in need of divine protection. The oration asks that the virgin may be adorned and armed with deep faith, with unfailing hope, with sincere charity. Adorned and armed! Christ looks steadfastly at the virgin, and the glance of such love gives her form and beauty. Her beauty reveals the wonderful order of divine wisdom. God has turned the virgin to Himself. Through His Holy Spirit He has wrought in her that openness of mind and soul, which is recollected waiting, humble listening, undisturbed watching. The undivided attention of the virgin to the love of her Bridegroom is her armed preparedness against the world and the attacks of the Evil One.

The oration explains more in detail the virgin's armor. Deep faith means not only the obedient acceptance of all revealed truths, but also the risk of leaving aside all earthly security. It is that attitude towards God in which the whole existence is entrusted into the merciful hands of God. Man comes to the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit. May the virgin be armed with unfailing hope! The virgin is already full of Christ. He floods her with His glory, and yet she remains in darkness. May the virgin be armed with sincere charity! She knows only her Bridegroom. With Him she is united by that unique power of love which nothing in the world can excel.

It is that power by which Christ envelops His bride in His death. The death of Christ binds together the electing Bridegroom and the elected bride in a union of holy love for time and eternity. In His death Christ is the one entirely given over to the virgin. In His death the virgin is the one surrendered to Him by grace, standing defenceless before the world. Such defencelessness, wrought by Christ, is a manifestation of God's power. Enlightened by vigils, may the virgins carry out the work of their virginity. "Having been strengthened interiorly and exteriorly with the weapons of these virtues, may these Your handmaids blamelessly complete a life of virginity."

Through grace the virgin is *sponsa Christi*. Through grace the Church is represented by the virgin. The oration calls upon the virgin to exercise the grace of virginity, that is, to allow herself as a true image of the Church to be continually formed by the saving mysteries of the death and resurrection of her Bridegroom. The virgin must again and again let herself be taken captive by Christ, learn to die in Him and love death in Him. This happens through an ever more attentive participation in Holy Mass. When the virgin assists at Holy Mass, she keeps vigil with Christ in this world. By allowing herself to

be taken into His death she vigilantly bears her own guilt and that of the whole world. By such vigils she is also the one enlightened, the one resplendent in Christ, the one who already bears witness to the indestructible kingdom of love begun in Him.

But the works of "virginal chastity" are done in view of an eschatological consumption. "May they blamelessly complete a life of virginity." Virginity completes itself in the mystery of Christ and the Church made manifest in eternity. There the Christ-mystery brightens up all horizons. There the virgin is set free forever through Him into the infinite expanse of God's love. When the eternity of the triune God has allayed every desire for knowledge, every restiveness toward the infinite and the blissfully painful fire of yearning, the virgin will readily taste peace, the fruit which ripened for her in the death of her Spouse and in the celebrations of the Mysteries during her earthly life.

The bishop rises and standing pronounces the blessing over the virgins. After the consecration this blessing follows as a further confirmation of Christ's having taken possession of the virgin. The fullness of God's blessing is bestowed in Christ. The virgin is the property of the heavenly Father through, with and in Christ, through the fullness of the Spirit. Already in baptism and confirmation the fullness of the Spirit was poured out upon her. Now in the consecration of virgins the Christ-mystery is again operative in her by God's grace.

The fruit of Christ's death and resurrection is the Pneuma with His sevenfold grace. If the entire consecration of virgins is an expanding and spreading of baptismal glory, then also the repeated bestowal of the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon the virgins is a gracious growth and maturing of their pneumatic strength. The gifts of the Holy Spirit enable the virgin to live by Christ and to bear witness to Him. The Holy Spirit with

His abundant gifts comes from Christ and leads to Christ, giving the recipient strength to live the Christ-mystery in daily life. The gifts of the Holy Spirit in their manifold form bestow a final oneness and uniformity to a life lived in the Christ-mystery. The prayer of blessing is a renewed confirmation of God's ownership, when it is understood as professing the absolute primacy of the divine operation and care. May He confirm; may He establish; may He grant endurance; may He build up; may He enlighten; may He perfect; may He instruct; may He prepare; may He visit; may He preserve; may He comfort!

Such prayer contains the humble acknowledgement of the sovereign majesty of divine love. God is all. The petitioner is nothing. And even the petitioner's realization of his nothingness is a gift from God! The urgent petitioning of this prayer of blessing is impressive because it seeks to penetrate the incomprehensive vision of those who follow the Lamb and sing the new song without end.

For the last time the consecration of virgins speaks of the Lamb. The word "Lamb" contains all that to which the virgin is called, all that which God expects of her, all that which He promises her. Hasten with joy to meet Him! Enter into the King's chamber; receive the reward! May you abide in the land of the living! Hasten! Quickly the sacrificial flame of Christ's Sacrifice will consume you. In His Sacrifice you will become lovers. Love does not deceive. Hasten! This word is prompted by love, and love alone understands it; love alone obeys it. Enter into the Bridegroom's chamber with shining souls and glowing bodies! Enter into that sacred mystery where Christ permits love to become the unending bliss of His bride, the virgin. Enter into that inner chamber, sealed against darkness, where Christ communicates knowledge to His bride. By this knowledge she is known; by it she knows

and beholds Christ; by it she becomes glorious and shining. She receives the reward.

The virgin has always received gifts from God in a special way. Since during her earthly life she allowed herself to be purified into a most pure vessel by participation in the passion and death of Christ, she is filled with the life and love of the triune God in eternity. Love alone remains; God is love. From God it streams into the virgin and because of it she is altogether given over to Him. Thus her reward reflects the rest and the activity of the inner-trinitarian life. At the beginning of the prayers mentioned above, the word "hasten" was used. Now it says, "Remain." Between the two there is a burning anticipation, and already the virgin's rejoicing over the rapid approach of the great day of the Lord's Second Coming stirs up the choirs of angels. With the victorious sign of the cross the virgin is blessed by Christ the Lord, "who with the eternal Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns in perfect unity, God forever and ever."

16 . . . ANATHEMA

In the consecration of virgins God lets the realm of the holy be seen. At the same time, however, this realm is sharply set off against the "world." This is brought out by the anathema pronounced by the bishop at the end of the consecration ceremony. He who consecrates the virgin is God, whose Name is holy and awesome (*Sanctum et terribile nomen ejus*—Ps. 110:9).

In the consecrated virgin the Church recognizes her vocation to perpetual brideship. On this mystery between Christ and the Church God lavishes the tremendous glories of His sanctity. The mystery is enveloped in the *mysterium tremendum*, which is God. It is the saving mystery of creation willed by God from all eternity. But God's signs of salvation are also signs of His judgment. Since the virgin is an image of the *Ecclesia*, she is also mightily penetrated and formed by the reality of divine holiness. The virgin is a divinely consecrated sign of salvation in the world as well as an announcement of the judgment. Whoever violates a virgin consecrated to God violates God's holiness. Thus the realm of the Holy which shines forth in the consecrated virgin's relationship with Christ is surrounded, as it were, by avenging flames.

Modern man is no longer deeply conscious of the holy and of the self-destructive effect of sacrilegious violation. Whoever violates something holy falls into the hands of the living God. "Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). Only from this aspect can the threatening force of the

words be understood, "By the authority of Almighty God. . . we firmly forbid, under pain of excommunication, anyone to lead these virgins and consecrated nuns away from the divine service to which they pledged themselves under the banner of chastity. Let no one rob them of their property. . . ." And then follows the terrible phrase "Cursed be," spoken by the authority of Almighty God. Where the fullness of grace is bestowed there is special danger of Satan's attacks.

But the avenging flames of the wrath of the living God will also be there. We may not forget that Christ chose His bride and espoused Himself to her in His death. His death is a sign of His extreme love and therefore also a sign of His judgment. The virgin is virgin only in this sign of her Bridegroom. She inhales the odor of immortality which streams forth from the death of Christ. Thus whoever violates the virgin and remains unrepentant will experience the Lord's death unto eternal death.

An instance from the Old Testament may help us to understand the anathema. In the sixth chapter of the Second Book of Samuel is recorded the story of the translation of the Ark of the Covenant into the house of Obededom. The Ark of the Covenant bears the name of the Lord of hosts "who thrones above the cherubim." The Ark of God is placed on a new cart. On the way Oza held it because it was in danger of falling. But the Lord's indignation was enkindled against Oza, and God struck him then and there for his sacrilege. He died there near the Ark of God. Oza was not permitted to touch the Ark of the Covenant because he was not a priest. Dreadful mystery of God's holiness! Tremendous majesty of the Eternal One! Oza desired to help but he was not called. Uncalled he dared to approach divine holiness and death struck him.

The Ark of the Covenant is a type of the consecrated virgin. She carries Christ in her being. As has been said before, in the consecration of virgins God permitted the realm of the

holy to become visible. In the center of this realm stands the Ark of the Covenant, the virgin, surrounded by the flaming, unapproachable powers of heavenly spirits. Whoever violates her falls into the consuming flames of God's holiness. "Holy and awesome is His Name."

17 . . . COMMUNION VERSE

The virgins have approached the awe-inspiring table of their Spouse, Jesus Christ. The nuptial Banquet of the Lamb is prepared. This Banquet is espousal in its deepest reality. Christ nourishes the virgin with Himself as the One entirely sacrificed to the Father. The virgin receives Christ as the Food of death, that she may become strengthened unto dying in love. "We have passed from death to life" (1 Jn. 3:14). This passing from death to life takes place when the virgin receives Christ as Food. She is united with Christ's offering of Himself in death.

Christ's death was indeed a real descent, a fall to the lowest depths, but at the same time it was a passing over, a real return home. The virgin enters into this descent when she receives Christ in the sacrificial Banquet. Christ gives Himself to her as fruit of the cross, so that in Him she herself becomes fruit which the Father desires to harvest for the kingdom of heaven. In the holy Banquet Christ seizes the virgin and transforms her into His mystery, that she may become more and more one with Him in life, in death and in love.

In the sacred Banquet the mystical marriage of Christ with the virgin is sealed. The glory of this union becomes manifest in the Father's acceptance of Christ united with His bride, the virgin. In the sacred Banquet Christ unites the virgin with Himself in His surrender to the Father. The Father responds to this surrender by accepting it. Acceptance by the Father

means being allowed to be with Him and sharing in the perfection of the very life of the Trinity.

When the virgins are nourished with Christ Himself, when their whole being, their eyes and their lips and all their senses are sanctified by the reception of the Food of divine love, when the Blood of their Spouse has brought about in them a sober inebriation, they sing, "Honey and milk have I taken from His mouth, and His Blood adorns my cheeks." These words open a wide range of ideas. In the Old Testament we frequently meet the phrase, "The land flowing with milk and honey." It describes not only the richness of the land but the abundance of grace in the Messianic kingdom as it appears in the Church here on earth and ultimately, viewed eschatologically, as the completion of God's kingdom in the reality of the new heaven and the new earth.

In St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians (3:2) milk denotes the initial principles of doctrine. St. Peter says in his First Epistle (2:2): "As newborn babes, long for the unadulterated, spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up unto salvation." Here milk denotes the power of understanding gained in Christ and gradually matured in Him. Understanding is union with the known. Whoever knows Christ grows in intimacy with Him. He gains a comprehensive view of what is knowable, sees it as order and perceives it in its final relation to the Logos. The Odes of Solomon speak of milk and honey. In Ode 4 we read, "Sprinkle upon us Your dewdrops and open Your fountains, from which milk and honey flow to us in abundance." Ode 35 says, "As a babe with its mother was I carried, and the Lord's dew was a milk for me."

"Honey and milk have I taken from His mouth, and His Blood adorns my cheeks." For the virgin Christ is the boundless land flowing with milk and honey. His Blood is her renewal in spirit and fire. She has received Christ as spiritual

unadulterated milk. In Christ the virgin possesses the true *gnosis* (spiritual knowledge) of salvation. In Him she received the life of God. In Christ the knowledge of truth becomes profoundest life and life's ultimate necessity. The virgin drinks the spiritual unadulterated milk. By it she is strengthened with a new power of speech toward the Father. By it she grows more and more into the Logos, who alone is the infinitely replete Word of praise to the Father.

The mystery alive in the phrase "Honey and milk have I taken from His mouth" is almost too tender for words. Christ initiates the virgin into the mystery in which He gives Himself to her as the Word of the Father. By drinking the spiritual unadulterated milk the virgin receives that kiss by which Father and Son possess each other most completely for all eternity. The virgin is filled with the Logos and the Pnuma. Milk and honey, Logos and Pnuma, tender intimacy were given to the virgin. While she receives Communion, traces of blood are, so to say, on her cheeks. What wonderful symbolism those words reveal after the sacrificial Banquet! Christ bestows on His bride the precious, divine fullness of life in the sign of His Blood, the bridal gift by which alone the virgin can be *virgo* and *sponsa*. His Blood is a bridal ornament. "His Blood adorns my cheeks."

The whole inner glory of the virgin's brideship stems from Christ's sacrificial death. Her cheeks, crimsoned with the Blood of Christ, are now also a sign of her being chosen and designated as a sacrificial gift. Milk and honey, Logos and Pnuma and Blood—in these the virgin is now, in Christ's Sacrifice, herself a sacrifice for the glorification of the heavenly Father. His Blood is her ornament. That is a promise. She follows the Lamb not only into the mystery of His death but also into the inextinguishable fire of His glorification.

18 . . . ORATIONS OF THE MASS

"Grant, we beseech You, O Lord, to Your handmaids here present, whom You have graciously adorned with the honor of virginity, the complete fulfillment of the work undertaken; and that they may offer you a perfect oblation, may they deserve to carry out to the end what they have begun" (oration).

The espousal of Christ to the virgin takes place during the celebration of Holy Mass. It could not be otherwise for Holy Mass is the mystery of the redemption. In His sacrificial death Christ takes mankind as His bride. Christ's death is His marriage contract with the Church. In the rite of the consecration of virgins a special collect, secret prayer and postcommunion are said under one conclusion with the orations of the day. This shows that the consecration of virgins is intimately connected with the sacred action of the Mass. An oration of the Church follows a definite external structure: the invocation, a statement of the motives for our prayer, the petition and the conclusion "through Christ our Lord." The meaning of the oration is characterized by its connection with the plan of the redemption in history, the Christ-power as the actual heart of the oration and, finally, an application to the supernatural life of the Christian.

What is meant by this inner structure is illustrated in the oration of the consecration of virgins. The historical connection with the redemption can be seen in the basic trinitarian

character of the oration. The Father is addressed through Christ, and the unity of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit is solemnly professed. But the redemptive action of the oration is shown especially in this that God is seen acting on man in Christ and working in him in love, and that man, touched by God, appears under God's efficacy in union with Christ.

Here we are already speaking of the Christ-power, which is the heart of the oration. For there is no brighter repose, no purer, fuller activity than the reality which the Trinity is and reveals. God is repose and at the same time pure activity. God's being is well-ordered power which is reposefully active without end. The mystery of the divine life of the Trinity is knowing and loving, begetting and being begotten, breathing and being breathed, sending and being sent. The oration speaks of how this Christ-power penetrated creation and how man was placed into its vital life-stream. God penetrates creation in divers ways, giving evidence of the unlimited power of His divine life. In the oration it is said that God has adorned handmaids with the honor of virginity, and He is implored to grant fulfillment to the work they have undertaken.

The reality of redemption consists in this that God has called human beings to virginity through His Son in the Holy Spirit; may the Trinity now grant a perfect completion to the work undertaken. May Christ espouse Himself to the virgin in the consecration of virgins during the celebration of Holy Mass; may He even in this life celebrate nuptials with the virgin in the Mysteries of the Church. And may such a wedding feast be a pledge of the great espousal with the Lamb in eternity. It may now be clearer why the expression "connection with the plan of the redemption in history" was used. God appears as the Eternal One, who acts by grace in history, so that His creature shares in His divine life. One must view the fruitful forces in the redemptive work with eyes of faith.

How ineffably great God is! The virgin is chosen by the triune God in order to offer God a perfect oblation. Indeed God shows His omnipotence most wonderfully in permitting His creature to participate in His divine being and operation. What is meant by saying that the virgin offers God a perfect oblation? How can the virgin as a human being offer God anything perfect? For what is man of himself and by himself? The wisdom of God desired to sanctify and fill man's emptiness with life and glory. When God created man he created him man and woman. The total reality was to show itself in the complementary qualities of woman.

Yet in God's eyes Adam and Eve, as human beings, were still awaiting a greater fulfillment. Adam and Eve merely point to the actual fulfillment of the human being, as it was to be realized in the espousal of Christ with His Church. There Christ is the Bridegroom and the Church the Bride; there Christ is the Head and the Church, His Bride, His Mystical Body. Bride and Bridegroom form one perfect oblation in this wondrous unity of the Holy Spirit! Though it is a perfect oblation already in the present time, it will continue to ripen into perfect fruit until the end of time. By the preciousness of this fruit all creation will be transformed into the new heaven and the new earth.

The oration prays for the fulfillment of that which was begun in the virgin by her consecration. The consecration of virgins is a rite for the dying, as has already been said. The virgin loves the Bridegroom more and more deeply because she is more and more intimately familiarized and united with the mystery of his death. In His death Christ permits her to plunge into the perfect fullness of His glory and love. There the virgin becomes worthy to offer to the Father what the oration prays for.

We have already alluded to the Christ-power in the oration.

It is a manifestation of the redemptive work of God acting out of love. When the virgin prays the oration with a living faith she will learn to understand it as her prayer for life and death. Realizing this, she will become a perfect oblation more and more by entering into the death of Christ, first in the Sacrament, then, by the grace of the Sacrament, in all the situations of life. Regarding the spiritual scope of the oration, it may be said that what the oration asks for is fulfilled when the virgin becomes a spiritual being in the perfect oblation of Christ. If the proper content of the oration in the consecration of virgins is its Christ-power, and if God's redemptive work is revealed in it, then something must be said in conclusion about its eschatological aspect.

The oration speaks of a beginning and an end. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Christian virginity begins in Christ, matures in Him and fulfills itself in Him. Christ is given to the virgin as her beginning, and this includes every first step she may take. Christ is given to the virgin as her end. By this is meant that Christ is the death of the virgin, that He is her final perfection. Thus the oration speaks of the end, of death, which opens the door to the consummation of love. May the virgin reach the end so that she may live forever. May her earthly life be more and more inclined towards Christ's death, so that heavenly things may dominate her. The more the heavenly dominates in her the more the end disappears, so that eternity, as a celebration of perfect fulfillment, may begin here and now for the virgin.

"By the sacrificial gift offered here grant to these Your handmaids perseverance in perpetual virginity, that at the opening of the gate, when the Most High King appears, they may enter into the kingdom of heaven with joy" (secret prayer). The virgin brings the host, her sacrificial gift, to the altar. Thus she testifies that she is called by Christ and that she sur-

renders to Him. She desires to enter into the Sacrifice of Christ in order to become a sacrificial gift to the heavenly Father, in and with Christ. The virgin knows that the Sacrifice of Christ is the one secret source of her virginity and her brideship. In the cross, sacrifice and death of Christ the virgin meets with Christ in such a manner that, taken over by His Spirit, she recognizes the indissolubility of the union with her Bridegroom as the law of her life and death.

The secret prayer asks that perseverance unto eternal virginity may be granted the virgin through the offering of her sacrificial gift. This petition offers a challenge. By offering the sacrificial gifts the virgin has resigned herself and yielded herself up. This offering must be understood from its nature. It is her consent to be sacrificed, her consent to being poured out and emptied, her consent to die. By her consecration the virgin is called by Christ to appear before Him. In humble readiness she wishes to be initiated more and more into the mystery of Christ's death in which she longs to die in order to live in His resurrection. The secret prayer asks that the virgin together with her sacrificial gift become one with Christ's sacrificial act, that from it she may merit eternal virginity.

What is eternal virginity? It is the unfading flower that blooms only in the abyss of Christ's death, the precious gem that derives its charmingly beautiful sparkle only from the Blood of the Lamb. Eternal virginity is the vessel wrought and formed in the fire of suffering and death; it contains the mysteries of God, which continually overflow with the preciousness of divine love. Eternal virginity is the altar enveloped in undying flames. It is being bound to Christ in an eternal union. As has been said, Christ assumed human nature from the Blessed Virgin Mary through the Holy Spirit. In and through it human nature was united with Christ in bridal union. Christ never dismisses humankind from His love, and

the grace by which Christ's human nature is united with the Logos endures forever. Thus God's life and love stream continually into our Lord's human nature and through it into the entire human race.

The Church is the Bride of Christ for time and eternity, and the espousal of Christ with the virgin is a very real image of this marriage of Christ with the Church. Christ's fidelity to His Bride, the Church, is shown again and again in His death. By Christ's inexhaustible power of love His sacrifice gives endurance to eternal virginity. The virgin must remain empty, must be poor in spirit. Her emptiness, her poverty, is her gift to the Bridegroom, and even this gift is the fruit of His Sacrifice.

Therefore the secret prayer asks that the virgin may persevere in perpetual virginity, so that at the opening of the gate, when the Most High King appears, she may enter with joy into the kingdom of heaven. What may the expression "At the opening of the gate" signify? It signifies God's glory in His Christ, returning with might and splendor at the close of history, when all God's mysteries will be revealed. Into this revelation all redeemed creation will enter to be flooded with the splendor of the Trinity. This revelation will reach as far as creatures can grasp God. It will be the revelation of the primordial mystery of the Trinity as one act of eternal love. But precisely because this final revelation is an act of God's love it will also be concealed. This unfathomable depth of divine love is an enduring delight for the creature as long as its enjoyment is granted to the creature. What will the virgins be at the final revelation of God? They will be and remain *virgines Domini*. The grace of their being-with-Christ will then be fulfilled. They are espoused to Him forever.

The words of the secret prayer recall the words of the Apocalypse of St. John, "Behold, an open door I saw in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard speaking to me with the

sound of a trumpet, said: Come up here! I will show you what must take place later. At once I fell into ecstasy, and behold: There stood a throne in heaven, and upon the throne sat someone who looked like a jasper or sardis-stone. Round about the throne were other twenty-four thrones, upon which I saw seated twenty-four elders who were clothed in white robes and had golden crowns upon their heads. From the throne came forth lightning and voices and thunder. Before the throne were burning seven torches, they are the seven spirits of God. Before the throne there lay, as it were, a sea of glass, crystal-like. . . ." (4:1-6). In this vision the virgin, strong and joyous for sacrifice, will be able to endure the burning desire of waiting for the Lord.

"O God, who has established Your dwelling in chaste hearts, look down upon Your handmaids here present, that they may obtain by Your consolation what they ask for by continual self-denial" (postcommunion).

The consecration of virgins is completed. United with Christ in Holy Communion and sanctified in the mystery of His love, the virgin is now consecrated in God's eyes. The virgin's heart is now a pure vessel of the Christ-mystery. She is now most truly the veiled bride and queen. Now that God has lavished His glory on His bride, the postcommunion speaks of continual self-denial. The world stands opposed to the virgin, and the darkness of Satan lurks in her path. Only in prayer and sorrow can she carry the light of love through a world of dangers and struggles. God's redemptive love calls her to glory which she gains only by suffering and dying with Christ.

The postcommunion asks that God look down upon the virgin. Even as the Lord in His incomprehensible condescension wishes to find a resting-place in the faith of the virgin, so she prays for security in His countenance. Look down upon this Your handmaid, O Lord! May she experience continual self-

denial (*castigatio*) as an unmerited participation in the sufferings of her Lord; may she become more and more like Him by self-denial thereby receiving the very features of her Bridegroom. Thus her self-denial and all it implies will become a consolation of divine love.

It is important not to lose sight of these thoughts as the consecration of virgins draws to a conclusion. Indeed in His redemptive power God deals with the virgin by making her share and cooperate in the redemption! God fills the virgin with the power of Christ for His own glorification as a blessing for the world. Here we must also understand that the virgin is dismissed from the celebration of her consecration as one destined by the love of her Spouse to suffer, as one consecrated unto death. What sort of bridal relationship is this, which by suffering becomes and remains beautiful and in dying defies separation? For what does the postcommunion ask? It asks for Christ, for communion in His passion and death. Christ is the consolation of the virgin. He is her hope of glory, her life, her way to the Father; He is her abiding love. In eternity her tears will cease and her mourning will grow silent. The unveiled glory of her Lord will never again let go the blessed captive of His love.

As we reflect on the oration, the secret prayer and the postcommunion, does it not seem as if God, having chosen the virgin for the joy of the heavenly beings and for the dread of the evil spirits, desires to let this deeply moving drama of the redemption reach a striking representation? Only from this point of view can we understand the words *virgines Domini*.

19 . . . AUTHORIZATION FOR RECITING THE CANONICAL HOURS

Before presenting the breviary the bishop prays for a blessing, in virtue of which the virgin can give others an example of a good life, through Christ our Lord. Then the virgin receives the responsibility of praying the Canonical Hours of the Church. This takes place in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This is an authorization to participate in perfecting and spreading the mystery of Christ, the mystery of His incarnation, ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit. This mystery includes, furthermore, the reality of the Church in her present state here on earth and in her perfected form in heaven. It effects the redemption of all creation from before the fall to the fullness of time. Between the fullness of time and Christ's Second Coming the supernatural elevation of creation and its consummation in Christ take place. Until this Last Day, the *Dies Christi*, the Incarnation of the Son of God accomplishes the consecration of the world gradually. The *consecratio mundi* is the consecration of the rational creature, of space, of time and of all other orders of creation.

By her consecration the virgin has become in a unique way a co-bearer of the Christ-mystery. Her personal existence is consecrated by Christ. Christ has united Himself to her and lives His life in her. The consecratory powers of His Incarnation, resurrection and His Second Coming assert themselves

in her with a particularly powerful efficacy. The virgin's life is entirely permeated by these redemptive forces of the Christ-mystery. Wherever she is, all that she is and does, is from Christ, through Christ, in Christ and for Christ. The mystery of the Mass holds the absolute center in the virgin's life. From this center she is taken over again and again by Christ. She emerges from His death with a love strong as death and from His resurrection with a radiant, though still secret, life of glory.

The virgin lives the mystery of the Mass with which the recitation of the Canonical Hours is closely connected. What else does the breviary intend but to lead to the altar and to radiate from it and then to lead back to it again? Viewed thus, the recitation of the breviary is truly more than a duty. It is a God-given charge. The redemptive act of the *consecratio mundi*, reaching out from every Mass, is caught up, as it were, in the Divine Office and made to stream forth farther and farther. The recitation of the Divine Office calls to mind that since the day of Christ each season is a time of grace consecrated by Christ's Incarnation.

The breviary, understood from the altar and flowing from it, is, in its deepest sense, Christ, into whom we are incorporated, praying and giving the blessings of His death and resurrection to creation. In the Divine Office Christ passes on to the members of His Mystical Body the strength of the Holy Sacrifice. In other words, Christ prays, and we take part in His prayer. In such prayer the *consecratio mundi* continues.

Let us look closer. The Divine Office of the Lord's Day, Sunday, is of special significance. The Lord's Day is the beginning of the week, consecrated by the celebration of the redemptive mysteries of the Lord's death and resurrection. Thus the Lord's Day at the beginning of the week becomes a concrete sign of the eighth day, the day of the Coming of the Lord. The first day of the week, Sunday, draws the whole

week into Christ's work of redemption, which begins with the Incarnation and is consummated in the Second Coming of Christ. Each week grows out of the mystery of the Lord's Day and is thus a vivid expectation of the Parousia. The Divine Office for Sunday brings all the weekdays into this great, mighty rhythm of expectation crying, "*Maranatha*" ("Come, Lord Jesus"). But the Sunday is sanctified by the mystery of the Mass and by the recitation of the breviary, which derives its meaning solely from the Mass.

The night before Sunday is the symbol of Christ's death. The morning of the Lord's Day is a sign of His resurrection. The full light of noonday is a promise of the abiding brightness of eternity. Evening symbolizes that the present eon is declining. The last day of history will expose the powers of the Lord's death and resurrection, and the new heaven and the new earth will be a result of the darkness of Christ's death and the brightness of His resurrection. Thus viewed from the Lord's Day there rests on each week the death-shadow of Christ's death as a sign that the old eon of sin is passing away. But over each day of the week the glory of Christ's resurrection also shines as a proclamation of the fact that secretly the new eon is already present and will soon become manifest at the Lord's Second Coming.

Under this aspect the Divine Office also belongs to the *Mysterium*; it is the life of the new creation. Moreover, each weekday has its own proper Mass and Divine Office. Thus each day is a seed-corn of the new creation that rests in the dark bosom of history until Christ will manifest its ripeness and fruitfulness at His Second Coming. The mysteries of the Sunday, the week and of the Church-year point in each liturgical celebration to the all-embracing mystery of Christ's Incarnation and to the whole of His redemptive work, and thereby also to the *consecratio mundi*.

Perhaps the term "authorization", the special mandate to pray the Divine Office, is now clearer. By the recitation of the Divine Office the virgin as *sponsa Christi* is truly the help-mate of the Bridegroom in leading the world home. What else is the virgin's chanting of the psalms but her bridal invitation to all creation to understand her innermost longing, her waiting for the final redemption! Because in all she is and does the virgin is the living expectation of the Parousia, she cannot but sing psalms and hymns; in and with creation she goes to meet Christ for the wedding feast in eternity. Thus the virgin is an example of a good life, as the oration before the presentation of the breviary states. But she can be this only through Christ our Lord, that is, only in, with, from and for Him.

20 . . . MARY

Several expressions about Mary are found in the text of the consecration of virgins. In the blessing of the veils we read, "Sanctify with Your right hand these veils, which Your handmaids desire to place upon their heads for love of You and Your Mother, the Most Blessed Virgin Mary." In the preface we meet the words, "Perpetual virginity has recognized its Author and, emulating the purity of the angels, has dedicated itself to the bridal chamber of Him who is the Bridegroom of perpetual virginity and perpetual virginity's Son." And in the concluding prayers of blessing we find, "May you always remain incorrupt, inviolate and undefiled under the garb of Holy Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Expressions about Mary in the consecration of virgins are few, but significant and profound. Mary is a mystery. Initiation into this mystery can come only from Christ or more exactly, from Christ and the Church. Mary is a unique revelation of God's wisdom. Into no other creature did God allow the depths of His wisdom to shine as into Mary. She, immaculately conceived, the Bride of the Logos, the Mother of God and perpetual Virgin, assumed into heaven and powerful intercessor, is a unique praise of the glory of Christ.

No creature was so permeated by God's glory, none so steeped in or transformed by it as Mary. The powers of the Incarnation of Christ, of His death, resurrection, ascension and His sending the Holy Spirit have been lavished on Mary.

Through Christ and His inexhaustible riches Mary is what she is: Bride, perpetual Virgin and Mother. She is filled with Christ to overflowing. In Mary it becomes clear how far a creature can become a vessel of God through Christ. How the grace of God creates anew becomes evident in the manner in which Mary was permitted to conceive of the Holy Spirit, how she became the Mother and Bride of the Logos, and how consequently, the Father's good pleasure rests abidingly in her.

Mary is uniquely like Christ. Because of this she was never without struggle and suffering during her earthly life. While nearest to God's mysteries she remained unknowing in the silence of her Son. She was called into the brightness of Christ as no other creature; yet she suffered in the darkness of constant sacrifice. Of all creatures she is most deeply struck by Christ; yet she remains erect by faith and love, the sword in her heart. What silence ultimately can be becomes evident in Mary. Similarly, giving praise can turn into prophecy and surrender. She voiced her deepest knowledge of Christ in her *Magnificat*. But this *Magnificat* burst forth from the glory wrought in her from the beginning by Christ's cross. Mary is initiated into the cross of her Son. Therefore she must both be silent and sing.

That Mary is mentioned in the consecration of virgins at the blessing of the veils is very significant. All that has been said about the symbolism of the veil may here be recalled. The veil covers and conceals; it is a sign of subjection and surrender. It is a symbol of reverence and as such demands respect. It is the sign of the virgin called by God as well as of the mother called by God unto fruitfulness. The veil is ultimately a religious sign. Mary is "under the veil" as God's elect, as the Mother of His Son, as the one enduring all in darkness of faith, as the one sacrificing and being sacrificed. She is under her veil as the one shining in the superabundant bright-

ness of Christ's glory. She remains under her veil in the blissful vision of the triune God. The virgins receive the veil in order to live and die under it, in order to conceal themselves under it, so that they may reveal themselves to God as Mary did!

The preface speaks of the Son of eternal virginity. As Mother and Virgin, Mary is the image of the Church. Motherhood in perpetual virginity can be understood only in reference to the Church. The Church is the Bride of Christ, chosen by Him, loved by Him. He gives Himself to her. Through Him and in Him she is also Mother, fruitful by the power of His Spirit, for she forms Him in men and creation. She carries Him to the very ends of the earth. She is in travail till the end of time. But when His Mystical Body has reached its fullness, she will experience the everlasting joy of the mother who has brought forth a child; yet she remains *sponsa*, surrendered to Christ in virginal love and united to Him forever.

The virgins shall remain inviolate under the protection of Holy Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. The following text from the Divine Office of the Assumption may explain what is meant here. "Who is she that ascends like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, exquisite as the sun, terrible as an army in battle-array?" In Mary rises the dawn of the new creation. She is beautiful as the moon. Like it she receives her light. From her break forth the rays of the sun which is Christ. From her the Light of life and love takes its victorious course to the ends of the earth. Mary is the bearer of salvation.

But what is the meaning of the words "Terrible as an army in battle-array" (*acies ordinata*)? In Mary there never was any resistance to grace. Her whole being is inviolate and inviolable order. In her grace is her most powerful life. The Holy One exerted His full efficacy in her because she said, "*Ecce ancilla Domini*." She accepted God's love unconditionally and she loves Him unreservedly. In this she is terrible and unassail-

able against all the powers of darkness. Christ has revealed in Mary the saving power of His redemption and allows it to become in her the sign of His judgment. The virgins, indeed the whole Mystical Body of Christ, are under Mary's protection. Together with her, the Mystical Body forms the *acies ordinata*. We may also understand *acies ordinata* as the form of the cross which no power of evil can overcome.

21 . . . *TE DEUM*

There is a joy which transforms the whole man. It not merely raises our sense of life or makes us experience the depths of life with a special lucidity. The joy here referred to has its source not in human and earthly things but in God Himself. God is uncreated joy insofar as He experiences His own existence as highest bliss. Christ reveals the God of joy to us, for He Himself is God's joy streaming into creation. Joy is not without love, love not without fruitfulness and fruitfulness not without life. Christ is all these. Whoever receives Christ possesses not only a new sense of life but also the new life itself. He has the joy of life and the life of joy.

The consecration of virgins bestows Christ on the virgin, but it bestows Him as the one true and abiding joy! Whoever is espoused to Christ receives not merely pure and simple joy. He also shares in the new and glorious manner in which Christ bestows joy on the world after it was lost through sin and regained through His cross and resurrection. Furthermore, Christ has bequeathed the celebration of His death as a precious legacy, so that by that celebration the new joy of life would be felt. Truly, this new joy bequeathed to man by Christ is intelligible only from the joy of His death. This joy, in turn, is knowable only from Christ's loving obedience to His Father, from His will to glorify His Father. Christ assents to all the terror, agony and loneliness of His death, as much as He could submit to them with His divine-human love. The

death of Jesus was the unique way of making accessible to creation the source and goal of all joy, the Father! Our speaking about the joy of death has real value only because the Father accepts it.

The *Te Deum* at the close of the consecration of virgins may be understood as a streaming forth of the love to which the virgins were called and in virtue of which they may taste the joy of death by sharing in Christ's death, and the joy of life by sharing in His resurrection, whenever, wherever, however God disposes.

This love of joyous death and life possesses a power that comes from within. It makes itself known in connection with the heavenly hosts, who are called to the glory of the new, seeing love. Thus in the *Te Deum* the virgins call upon the heavenly spirits, who share in the trinitarian life of God. In the death-joy of Christ they glorify the Father and rejoice in the life-joy of the risen Lord. The virgins sing, "*Te Deum laudamus*," recognizing themselves as that which they are to become in Christ by the grace of God: sacrificial flame, self-consuming yet inexhaustible, for the glorification of the Father.

22 . . . CONCLUDING PRAYERS

After the virgins have sung, "Confirm, O Lord, what you have begun in us, from Your holy temple which is in Jerusalem," the bishop says the final prayer of the consecration. This prayer is an expression of purest surrender to God. Holy expectation, profound repose, strong faith and unlimited vision are contained in this surrender.

"We beseech You, O Lord, may our actions be preceded by Your inspiration!" God is Spirit. His working is different from that of creaturely, bodily beings. God's working has the ease which results from absolute glory; it has the creative power of divine omnipotence; it has the spirituality of the hidden depths of divinity; it proceeds with unshakable certainty, as only divine liberty can. It has the character of irrevocability.

Divine inspiration, however, is also a divine call. God's call is the deep movement of His love, springing from His personality to His creatures. Everywhere the virgin becomes aware of the great, holy "You" of God, and everywhere she responds in self-surrender to it. Creation exists in virtue of divine activity, and in virtue of this activity there is a definite tendency in all creatures toward God. But God's inspiration means above all that God's countenance is turned graciously toward creation in Christ. It means God's giving Himself in Christ to His Bride, the Church. Dying, Christ breathed upon His Bride. From His death His Pneuma streams into her and

only because of it does she exist, live and love; only because of it is she His Bride. The inspiration of God is the love of Christ's tender touching of the virgin. It is already, as it were, the eternal day's soft breeze which gently blows upon the virgin, so that she may be everywhere in the spirit. May our actions be preceded by Your inspiration in whatever manner divine love may show itself, whether in the evening wind from the cross or the morning breeze of the new day in the glory of the risen Lord.

"May our actions be preceded by Your inspiration." This is the petition for the Pneuma, which blows where it will. The Pneuma is the love of Christ and of the Father, disposing all things in a varied but personal manner. It is the presence of that quiet light by which one becomes aware of all being and of Absolute Being. Never can man be first; God is always the first and the last. Man's work and accomplishments can only follow. The virgin may always follow the Lamb, but even this she cannot do of herself. God's help and protection must accompany her in her prayer and work. Christ desires His bride as His companion and helpmate. The consecrated virgin can begin only in Christ, proceed only in Him, and He alone can finish in her what He has begun in her.

What about God-appointed beginnings? They come from an unfathomable, irrevocable decree. All beginnings which God appoints bear in them the consecration of their holy source. When God effects a beginning, He places in it many powers which work themselves out as revelations of His wisdom and glory but at the same time as concealments of His profound eternal thoughts. What did God begin in the virgin consecrated to Him? He began in her her seeking for Him, her offering herself in Him to the Father, her covering herself with the veil, that all hidden knowledge may ripen into a beholding with unveiled countenance. He began in her her

knowing herself bound to the love-mystery of the Trinity by the symbol of her ring. He began in her her loving the cross and her accepting the crown of thorns in the hope of receiving the crown of glory. Finally, He began in her her becoming glorious in Christ's death and resurrection.

And now, O Lord, put an end to this beginning. You are the end. Whoever is always in You finds His fulfillment in God. Whoever is in You comes to an end with himself. But because he comes to Your end, to Your death, he will at the same time be transformed and transported to Your eternity. Thus make an end, O Lord, by completing the work begun. Grant, O Lord, to the virgins consecrated to You the beginning of a death, the manner or form of which You alone can determine. Grant to those who belong to You the beginning of the resurrection. Give Yourself to Your own as the fulfillment of Your promise. Their whole being will thus rejoice. The marriage of the Lamb has come. Amen.

THE LITURGY OF THE CONSECRATION OF VIRGINS ACCORDING TO THE ROMAN PONTIFICAL

(In Benedictine communities the hymn, Jesu, corona Virginum, is sung during the procession into the chapel. Having entered the church, the virgins genuflect and then kneel in their places. The Bishop proceeds to the sanctuary, and having removed the cope, is vested for the Pontifical Mass, which he commences at once. The Mass is that of the day, with the following oration for virgins under one conclusion with the Collect:

Grant, we beseech You, O Lord, to Your handmaids here present, whom You have graciously adorned with the honor of virginity, the complete fulfillment of the work undertaken; and that they may offer You a perfect oblation, may they deserve to carry out to the end what they have begun. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who with You lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

I

Invitation and Presentation of the Virgins

After the Alleluia verse (or before the last verse of the Tract or Sequence), the Bishop, with mitre, is seated on the faldstool before the middle of the altar. The arch-priest, facing the virgins, sings:

Wise virgins, prepare your lamps. Behold, the Bridegroom comes. Go forth to meet Him!

After the virgins have lighted their candles, the arch-priest addresses the Bishop:

Most Reverend Father, holy Mother the Catholic Church desires that you deign to bless and consecrate the virgins here present, and to espouse them to our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Most High God.

The Bishop:

Do you know that they are worthy of this?

Answer:

Insofar as human frailty is able to know, I believe and testify they are worthy.

The Bishop:

With the help of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ we choose to bless and to consecrate these virgins here present and to espouse them to our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Most High God.

The Bishop then in a chanting tone calls the virgins:

Come!

They answer:

And now we follow.

They rise and come to the entrance of the choir where they kneel.

Again chanting the Bishop calls them:

Come!

The virgins rise and sing:

And now we follow with all our heart.

Then the Bishop calls:

Come, daughters, hear me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

The virgins answer:

And now we follow with all our heart; we draw near to

You with reverence and seek to see Your face. O Lord, do not put us to shame, but deal with us according to Your kindness and according to the greatness of Your mercy.

The virgins sing:

Receive me, O Lord, according to Your word; let no injustice gain power over me.

II

The Self-surrender of the Virgins in Legal Form (Profession)

The Bishop:

Do you desire to persevere in the state of holy virginity?

They answer:

We desire it.

He asks each one individually:

Do you promise to preserve virginity forever?

She answers:

I promise it.

The Bishop says:

Thanks be to God!

III

The Consecration

The Bishop:

Do you desire to be blessed, consecrated and espoused to our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Most High God?

They all answer:

We desire it.

a) Litany of the Saints and Hymn to the Holy Spirit

To the Litany is added:

That You would graciously bless Your handmaids here present. We beseech You, hear us. That You would graciously bless and sanctify Your handmaids here present. We beseech You, hear us.

After the Litany the Hymn is sung:

Come, Creator Spirit!

b) Blessing of the Garments and Insignia

The Bishop first blesses the garments:

℣. The Lord be with you.

℟. And with your spirit.

Let us pray. O God, who are filled with greatest fidelity in the promise of eternal goods and will certainly also fulfill Your pledges, You have promised Your faithful the garb of salvation and robes of eternal joy; we humbly implore Your kindness that You may graciously bless these garments, which signify humility of heart and contempt of the world and by which Your handmaids shall be visibly reminded of their holy state, that under Your protection they may preserve the garb of holy chastity which they assume by Your inspiration. May they, whom You clothe in the habit of so venerable a state in this mortal life, one day also be clothed with blessed immortality. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who with You lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

Let us pray. O Lord God, You bestow good gifts and bountifully pour out all blessings; we urgently beseech You to bless and sanctify these garments, which Your handmaids wish to put on, so that in them their holy state may be manifest and they may be recognized among other women as consecrated to You. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. Let us pray. Hear,

O Almighty God, our petitions and shower these garments, with which Your handmaids ask to be clothed, with the dew of abundant blessings, as You poured on the hem of Aaron's robes the blessing of the ointment which flowed down from his head onto his beard; and as You have blessed the garments of all religious consecrated to You, with whom You are most pleased, so deign to bless and sanctify these, and grant, O most kind Father, that the garments for these Your handmaids may be a protection unto salvation, a badge of their holy state, a beginning of sanctity, a firm defence against all assaults of the enemy, so that, persevering in continence, they may be rewarded a hundredfold. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Bishop blesses the veils:

Let us pray. Earnestly we beseech You, O Lord, that Your kind blessing descend upon these veils for the heads of Your handmaids; may these veils be blessed, consecrated, spotless and holy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. Let us pray. O God, Head and Savior of all the faithful, sanctify with Your right hand these veils, which Your handmaids desire to place upon their heads for love of You and of Your Mother, the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, and under Your protection may they always preserve blamelessly in body and in soul what these veils mystically signify, so that, when they shall come to the eternal reward of the saints, they may be found ready with the prudent virgins and, under Your guidance, deserve to enter into the nuptials of eternal happiness. Who live and reign forever and ever. Amen.

The Bishop blesses the rings:

Let us pray. Creator and Preserver of the human race, Bestower of spiritual grace and Dispenser of human blessings, send forth Your blessing upon these rings, that those who will wear them may be fortified with heavenly strength, preserve

unbroken faith and sincere fidelity, keep their virginal state as brides of Christ and persevere in perpetual chastity. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Bishop blesses the crowns:

Let us Pray. Bless, O Lord, these crowns and grant, through the invocation of Your Name, that all who will wear them may merit, after serving You faithfully, to receive the crown in heaven, which these crowns symbolize. Who in perfect Trinity live and reign, God forever and ever. Amen.

The virgins sing:

The kingdom of the world and all worldly ornaments have I despised for love of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom I have seen, whom I have loved, in whom I have believed, whom in love I have chosen. My heart utters a good word; therefore I will relate my works to the King.

Whom I have seen, whom I have loved, in whom I have believed, whom in love I have chosen.

c) Consecration of the Virgins by the Consecratory prayers

The Bishop:

Let us pray. Look down, O Lord, with favor upon Your handmaids, that by Your guidance they may preserve the state of holy virginity, which they assumed by Your inspiration. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who with You lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God. . .

The Bishop Sings:

℣. Forever and ever.

℟. Amen.

℣. The Lord be with you.

℟. And with your spirit.

℣. Lift up your hearts.

℟. We have lifted them up to the Lord.

℣. Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God.

℟. It is meet and just.

It is truly meet and just, right and salutary that always and everywhere we give thanks to You, O Holy Lord, Almighty Father, Eternal God, who are a gracious guest in chaste bodies and a lover of pure souls. By Your Word, by Whom all things are made, You so restore human nature, profaned in our first parents by the wiles of the devil, that You not only recall it to original innocence, but also lead it to a foretaste of eternal blessings prepared in the new era. You raise to a likeness with the angels human beings who are still in the flesh. Look down, O Lord, upon Your handmaids here present, who place the vocation of their continency and their surrender to You into Your hands, from whom they received the will to offer themselves. How else could souls still in the body overcome the inclinations of nature, the urge of sensuality, force of habit and the impulses of youth, if You, O God, had not graciously enkindled in their wills love for virginity, if You had not lovingly nourished the desire for it in their hearts, if You had not endowed them with fortitude.

You have poured out Your grace upon people in all generations and have adopted them, numerous as the stars, as heirs of the New Covenant. But among the gifts which You have bestowed upon Your own—on those who were begotten not by blood nor by the will of the flesh, but by Your Holy Spirit—you have mercifully given certain souls an altogether special gift. While no prohibition lessens the dignity of marriage and while the nuptial blessing resting on matrimony is safeguarded, nevertheless, there will be nobler souls who, spurning the carnal union entered into by man and wife, strive after the mystery it signifies. Without imitating what takes place in matrimony they devote their entire love to the

mystery signified by marriage. Perpetual virginity has recognized its Author and, emulating the purity of the angels, has dedicated itself to the bridal chamber of Him who is the Bridegroom of perpetual virginity and perpetual virginity's Son.

To those, then, O Lord, who implore Your help and who desire to grow strong by the blessing of Your consecration, grant the protection of Your strength and guidance, lest the ancient enemy, who assails nobler aspirations with subtler wiles, obscure the glory of perfect continence, steal into their unguarded souls and rob the virginal state of that purity which must adorn even those who are married.

May there dwell in them, O Lord, by the gift of Your Spirit, a prudent modesty, a wise kindness, a grave gentleness, a chaste freedom. May they glow with love but delight in nothing apart from You. May they live in a praiseworthy manner, but may they not desire to be praised. May they glorify You alone by their holiness of body and purity of soul. In love may they fear You, in love serve You. May You be their honor, their joy, their will, their comfort in affliction, their counsel in doubt, their defence in injury, patience in tribulation, abundance in poverty, food in fasting, medicine in sickness. May they possess all things in You, whom they love above all. Through You may they keep what they solemnly assumed as their vocation.

Aiming to please You, the Searcher of hearts, not according to the body but according to the spirit, may they be numbered among the wise virgins, so that waiting with the burning lamps of virtue and the oil of preparedness, they may not be confounded by the unexpected arrival of the heavenly Bridegroom; joining the choir of virgins going before them, may they hasten joyously with lighted lamp in hand to meet Him. May they not be shut out with the foolish but with the wise virgins freely enter through the royal gate. Tried in

enduring chastity, may they be permitted eternally to follow Your Lamb. Thus by Your bestowal of the gift of virginity they will be adorned with fruits a hundredfold.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who with You lives and reigns as King in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

d) The Symbolic Nuptials of Christ and of the Newly-consecrated Virgins

The Bishop chants the responsory, which the choir continues:

Come, My elect, I will set up My throne in you.
For the King desires your beauty.
Hearken, daughter, and see and incline your ear.
For the King desires your beauty.

Then the brides rise, humbly kneel before the Bishop and sing:

I am the handmaid of Christ; therefore, I conduct myself as becomes a handmaid.

Once more the Bishop asks:

Do you desire to persevere in holy virginity, which you have vowed?

They answer:

We desire it.

Thereupon he covers the brides with the veil and says:

Receive the holy veil, which shows that you have despised the world and have subjected yourself in truth and humility and with all the strength of your heart as a bride to Jesus Christ. May He preserve you from all evil and lead you to eternal life. Amen.

The veiled virgins sing:

He has placed a seal upon my forehead, so that I may admit no other lover besides Him.

The Bishop:

℣. The Lord be with you.

℟. And with your spirit.

Let us pray. By Your devoted care, O Lord, defend Your handmaids, that under Your protection they may preserve spotless the state of holy virginity, which they assumed by Your inspiration. Who live and reign with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

Once more the Bishop calls the brides:

✓ Come, beloved, to be espoused; the winter is past, the turtle dove calls, the blooming vineyards give forth their fragrance.

The brides ascend the altar steps. The Bishop places the ring on their right hand and says:

I espouse you to Jesus Christ, the Son of the Most High Father, that He may keep you unharmed. Therefore, receive the ring of fidelity, the seal of the Holy Spirit, that you may be called the spouse of God and, after you have served Him faithfully, you may be crowned eternally. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The virgins sing:

I am espoused to Him whom the angels serve, whose beauty sun and moon admire.

Lifting up their right hands, the virgins sing:

My Lord Jesus Christ has espoused me with this ring and has adorned me with a crown.

The Bishop:

May the Creator of heaven and earth, God the Almighty Father, bless you; He has graciously chosen you to be companions of the Blessed Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. Before God and His angels may you preserve upright and spotless the virginity you have professed. May you keep

your promise, love chastity and suffer patiently, so that you will deserve to receive the crown of virginity. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Again the Bishop calls the virgins to the altar:

Come, bride of Christ, receive the crown which the Lord prepared for you from eternity.

Kneeling the brides receive the crown. The Bishop says:

Receive the crown of virginal excellence. As you are crowned by our hands on earth, may you deserve to be crowned by Christ with glory and honor in heaven. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

The brides sing:

The Lord has clothed me with a garment of gold and He has adorned me with priceless jewels.

Now the Bishop prays:

℣. The Lord be with you.

℟. And with your spirit.

Let us pray. Grant, we beseech You, Almighty God, that Your handmaids here present who, in the hope of an eternal reward, desire to be consecrated to You, may persevere in their holy state with full fidelity. Bestow on them, O Lord, humility, chastity, obedience, charity and an abundance of all good works, so that they may deserve eternal glory. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us pray. We beg You, O Holy Lord, Almighty Father, Eternal God, in behalf of these Your handmaids, who have vowed to serve You with a pure mind and heart, that You may graciously join them to the one hundred and forty-four thousand who remained virgins, who did not defile themselves with women, and in whose mouth was found no guile. Thus let Your handmaids here present remain spotless to the end through our immaculate Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The virgins sing:

Behold, what I have longed for I see; what I hoped for I possess; I am united with Him in heaven, whom on earth I have loved with utmost devotion.

e) Concluding Prayers of Blessing

The Bishop:

O God, Moulder of bodies and Infuser of souls, You despise no age, reject no sex and hold no station unworthy of Your grace, but are equally Creator and Redeemer of all. Cover Your handmaids here present whom You, Good Shepherd, have graciously chosen from Your flock with the strength of Your protection, that they may preserve the crown of perpetual virginity and chastity of soul. As their Teacher, prepare them with wisdom for every work of virtue and glory, so that they, overcoming the lusts of the flesh and fleeing illicit wedlock, may merit indissoluble union with Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Give them, we beseech You, O Lord, powerful weapons, not of the flesh but of the spirit, so that, their senses and members strengthened by You, sin cannot reign in their souls and bodies. Since they desire to live in Your grace, let not the advocate of the wicked and the enemy of the good claim anything for himself in these virgins consecrated to Your Name. May the rain of Your heavenly grace extinguish every harmful flame and enkindle the light of perpetual chastity. Let their modest countenance be closed to all scandals and let no carelessness provide an occasion for sin. May a chaste virginity dwell in them; may they be both adorned and armed with deep faith, unfailling hope, sincere charity, so that prepared for chastity they may overcome all the wiles of the devil, and, despising that which passes, they may seek that which is eternal. May they prefer fasting to feasting, holy reading and prayers to eating and drinking. Nourished by prayer, filled with instruction, enlightened by vigils, may they

accomplish the work of virginal chastity. Having been strengthened interiorly and exteriorly with the weapons of these virtues, may these Your handmaids blamelessly complete a life of virginity. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

May the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit bless you with every spiritual blessing; may you always remain incorrupt, inviolate and undefiled under the garb of Holy Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. May the Spirit of sevenfold grace rest upon you, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and fortitude, the Spirit of knowledge and piety, and may you be filled with the Spirit of the fear of the Lord. May He strengthen the frail, fortify the weak, elevate you in love, rule over your minds, direct your ways, instill holy thoughts, approve your actions, perfect your works, build up charity in you, enlighten you in wisdom, confirm you in chastity, instruct you in knowledge, strengthen you in faith, increase virtue in you, raise you up in holiness, prepare you for patience, make you docile for obedience, protect the sober and pure; may He visit you in sickness, bring you relief in sorrow, safeguard you in temptation, make you frugal in prosperity, gentle in anger, pure amid iniquity; may He infuse grace in you, forgive your offences, bestow discipline on you, so that, filled with these and similar virtues and adorned with good works, you may always strive to do what is worthy of reward.

May He be your witness who will also be your judge. Prepare yourself to bear the burning lamp in your hands. You who are to enter into the chamber of the Bridegroom hasten with joy to meet Him. May He find nothing odious in you, nothing unclean, nothing secret and corrupt, nothing shameful. May He find in you pure souls, bright and resplendent bodies, so that when that dreadful day for rewarding the good and punishing the wicked comes, the avenging flame

shall find nothing in you to burn up. May divine love find only what is to be crowned. May you, whom a spiritual life has purified on earth, deserve to be protected, together with those who follow the Lamb and sing the new canticle without ceasing, when the Eternal King ascends the judgment seat. After receiving the reward of your labors, may you remain in the land of the living. And may He Himself bless you from heaven who came graciously to redeem the human race on earth by His agony of the cross, Jesus Christ our Lord, who with the Eternal Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns in perfect unity, God forever and ever. Amen.

IV

The Anathema

The Bishop:

By the authority of Almighty God and His Apostles Peter and Paul, we firmly forbid, under pain of excommunication, anyone to lead these virgins and consecrated nuns away from the divine service to which they pledged themselves under the banner of chastity. Let no one rob them of their property, but rather allow them their property in peace. But if anyone presume to attempt such a thing, let him be cursed in and out of his home, cursed in the city and in the country, cursed waking and sleeping, cursed eating and drinking, cursed walking and sitting; cursed be his flesh and his bones, and from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head may there be nothing sound in him. Let the curse of men fall upon him, as the Lord permitted it to come through Moses in the Old Law upon the sons of iniquity. May his name be erased from the book of the living, and may it no longer be written with that of the just. Let him have his portion and inheritance with Cain, the fratricide, with Dathan and Abiron, with Ananias and Saphira, with Simon Magus and Judas the traitor, and with those

who said to God, "Depart from us, we do not desire to walk in Your paths." Let him perish on the Day of Judgment. May the eternal fire swallow him up along with the devil and his angels, unless he make restitution and do penance. So be it done!

V

**The Completion of the Consecration of Virgins by
the Eucharistic Mystery**

*The following prayer is added under one conclusion to
the Secret of the Mass:*

By the sacrificial gifts offered here, grant to these Your handmaids perseverance in perpetual virginity, that at the opening of the gate, when the Most High King appears, they may enter the kingdom of heaven with joy. Through our Lord . . .

*After the brides have received Holy Communion, they
sing:*

Honey and milk have I taken from His mouth, and His blood adorns my cheeks.

*The following prayer is added under one conclusion to
the Postcommunion of the Mass:*

O God, who have established Your dwelling in chaste hearts, look down upon Your handmaids here present that they may obtain by Your consolation what they ask for by continual self-denial. Through our Lord.

VI

**Authorization of the Virgins for Reciting
the Divine Office**

*After the Blessing the Bishop prays over the consecrated
virgins:*

V. The Lord be with you.

R. And with your spirit.

Let us pray. Hear, O Lord, our prayers and send down upon

Your handmaids here present Your blessing, that, enriched by heavenly gifts, they may obtain the favor of Your Majesty and be able to show others an example of a good life. Through . . .

Now the Bishop holds out to them the Breviary, which they touch with both hands:

Receive this book, that you may begin the Canonical Hours and read the Office of the Church. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

VII

Conclusion of the Services

The Bishop intones the hymn:

Te Deum laudamus.

At the conclusion of the Te Deum, the choir sings:

Confirm, O Lord, what You have begun in us.
From Your holy temple, which is in Jerusalem.

The Bishop.

Let us pray We beseech You, O Lord, may our actions be preceded by Your inspiration and accompanied by Your help, that all our prayers and work may begin in You and through You be happily ended. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

The virgins then return to the portal of the convent, where the Bishop presents them kneeling before him to their spiritual mother, who also kneels:

See to it, that you preserve these consecrated virgins, as we in present them immaculate to God. You must render an account of them before the judgment seat of their Divine, the Judge to come.

Then the Bishop says the Last Gospel. And having put off his vestments he departs in peace.

Christ in His Consecrated Virgins



BY LUDWIG MÜNSTER